

SUMMER FLING

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By

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Abstract: Two estranged sisters, Liza and Nikki, travel to the seaside town of Hermanus. Liza hopes that a summer spent together will restore their once close relationship. Nikki is just looking for some fun. Then Liza disappears from the family holiday house. Messages left show that she's been abducted, kidnapped by someone who has no idea that Liza desperately needs her medication. In a country plagued by violence against women, Nikki, her parents, and the local police need to work together against the clock to save Liza. If only they could trust each other. Nikki is drawn deeper into a situation she cannot control or run away from as she tries to find her sister before it's too late. Toxic family history emerges and tensions mount as the kidnappers demand a large ransom. Liza's health is deteriorating fast and Nikki's efforts to make amends are met with doubt and hostility. Will Nikki be able to help her sister before it's too late?

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Chapter 1: Summer

When was this summer going to start getting fun? Nikki stood on the steps in front of the house. She felt the power of the house, this airy, beautiful holiday house that completely depressed her. She should never have agreed to this holiday. She'd hoped that once they had settled in, the house would take shape around them, allowing them freedom of movement and comfort, but it was resistant. Cold, solid. She reached into her bag. There was still sand from the beach and the stickiness of the salty water stuck between her fingers. The grains rubbing between her skin and bones was driving her crazy. She just wanted to go inside and wash her hands. She fumbled through her handbag, fingers touching towel, lip-gloss, cell phone and sunscreen in her search for keys. She pushed the items aside, feeling annoyed, but stifling it with a smile. A hand touched her neck, pushing her hair aside, kissing the skin. She turned her head slightly. Michael was standing behind her. He smiled up at her. She wiggled her shoulders. "Hang on! I'm trying to find the keys." She looked down into the clutter of her bag.

"I freaking love your dad's car." His lips brushed her skin, his fingers pulling her hair away from her ears. He put his mouth next to her ear and whispered. "Next time, I drive."

She laughed, both because his breath tickled her and for the absurdity of the idea. Her dad didn't even know that she was driving his car. The silver Mercedes SLK was her dad's holiday car, left at the holiday house for holidays her parents rarely took. She turned around, looking up into his eyes and realised how tall he was. She took a step backwards, feeling the solid tiles of the stair behind her. Now she was slightly taller. "In your dreams! My dad would kill me." She cocked her head and winked.

His hands were still pulling at her hair, slipping down her shoulders, leaving warm, though slightly sweaty, electrical course ways along her arms. She felt the hair at the back of her neck standing up.

She smiled. She leaned forward, he took hold of her shoulders and kissed her full on the mouth. Nikki abandoned the search. She dropped her beach bag to the ground, hearing the keys clink somewhere in its ocean trench-like depths, and wrapped her arms around Michael's neck. Michael was pushing her backward, she took another step back, now even higher on the stairs.

“Hmm,” she pulled her lips away and almost heard the comical pop of pneumatic seals. “Grab my bag, will you?”

Michael groaned. “Come on.” He nodded to the front door. “I’ll get it later.”

Nikki raised her eyebrows. Her mood was changing. Michael was getting too comfortable around her, forgetting what their relationship status truly was. She felt the sarcastic retort bead like expectant juices on her tongue, almost as though she was anticipating a favourite food. She had to swallow it, like an unfulfilled craving, when Michael sighed, bent and picked up the bag. Nikki turned, taking the last few steps two at a time. She suddenly felt too hot in the sun. At the top step, she turned and looked down and out. Her parents’ house stood rooted on the mountainside. In the distance, she could see the half moon shaped bay, the light of the sun dancing across the waters. They were at the top of a cul-de-sac, with their driveway and main entrance facing the road. The early afternoon heat shimmered across the rooftops, making little cartoon heat lines above each one. She pulled her face into half a smile, imagining that the heat shimmering off each roof was the boiling emotions of those inside. What would cause heat to rise like that? Anger, passion? Something less clichéd? Oh, shit. She just remembered that she’d left her bedroom in a mess.

Michael came to stand next to her. “What you looking at?”

She shrugged. She made the smile softer, lowered her chin and looked into his eyes.

Michael put a hand underneath her chin, tilting it towards him. “Hey you.” His lips closed on hers. His arms folded around her, and she felt as though the heat of his body and the sun grilling her would cook her before they got inside to the shade. They moved, steps in a three-legged race with extra limbs hampering the progress, here halting, here stubbing sandaled feet against each other, slowly travelling backwards. Michael pressed Nikki against the front door, the keys forgotten.

“Hey, hey, wait!” Nikki pulled away. She turned her head to look at the door. “It’s unlocked.”

“Your sister probably left it open.”

“Um, no. She won’t.” She turned away, shoving his hands away. “She wouldn’t do that.” Nikki turned around slowly. The door was ajar. How had she missed from the bottom of the steps that it was unlocked? Maybe Liza had left it open for a bit of fresh air to move through the house in this heat. No, she wouldn’t have. Nikki pushed the door open. It swung forwards and

banged against the wall. The sound echoed through her, through the empty house. It was their parents' Hermanus holiday house. A show house, they sometimes joked, when their parents weren't around. Nikki had to swallow before she could call out. "Liza? Liza? Are you home?" Nikki took another step inside. "Liza!" She turned to Michael. "Hey, okay, I'm going to go upstairs and check the rooms. You check downstairs for her."

"Come on, you're overreacting."

"No, I'm not." She shook her head, trying to clear the sudden panic. "Just do it."

Nikki headed towards the staircase. She looked over her shoulder, Michael was hesitating by the front door, he was looking down at something on the wooden bench in the entrance hall.

"There's a package here –"

"Leave it!" She had already moved past the entrance hall with the wall full of her parents' artwork. She had run past the kitchen and the doorway that led off to the living room. She took another step, placing her foot on the first stair. Hang on, what was that? She bent down and took a closer look at the brownish stain so dark against the beige floor. Her back snapped up so quickly that it felt like she'd given herself whiplash.

"Liza!"

She took the stairs two at a time, until her foot caught the top step and she crashed down onto her knees. Her palms hit the floor, sounding almost like applause. She groaned as the bones within her knees ached and rubbed against each other, the skin stretching tight as the bruises started to form on her skin. Nikki bit her lip and stood up. She ran towards her sister's room.

Empty.

The room was neat. A small leaning tower of holiday reads lay on the bedside table, Liza's vitamins, medicine and dietary guides neatly stacked on the side. An open packet of dried fruit lay on the dressing table. The bed was smooth and hotel crisp. Nikki wondered if she should open the closet, search under the bed, scream some more. She turned and ran across the small passageway to her own room.

Her eyes were searching for anything unusual, anything out of place in their magazine perfect house. In her room, Nikki found the pile of clothes on the floor where she had left them, make-up tubes and tubs spread across her dressing table and her tablet on her pillow. Her bed was still unmade, crumpled sheets lying half on, half off the bed.

Her parents' bedroom door was locked. It was always locked when they were away. The key was still in the door. Her parents had explained that it was a security precaution. They locked all the doors, but left the keys on the outside. That way, if somebody broke into one of the bedrooms, it would take a little more effort to get into the other rooms. Nikki touched the key, her fingers tracing the shape of the end, feeling the tasselled key ring. "Liza? Are you in there?" She twisted her neck, turning her ear toward the door and listened. No answer. She ran back to the top of the stairs. "Michael! Is she there?"

Michael's head appeared in the doorway leading to the living room.

"Come look here!"

She ran down, jumping down from the second last step and feeling her sandaled feet almost slipping away from her. She threw her weight forward, forcing her feet and sore knees to move toward the living room. "What, where?"

Michael stepped out of the way, allowing Nikki's momentum to carry her into the room with one smooth, almost dancer-like arc.

Nikki skid to a stop. Her eyes kept moving, fixing on the separate objects that had made up the room. This was a family room, more a room of heirlooms and family memories. It was the only personal room in the house – the only room that her mother had allowed to be covered in personal items. The only room where the girls could leave something of themselves – their music, their novels, their photographs. This room held comfy couches, in warm reds and browns, the type of couches that invited one to flop down onto them, put your feet up, relax. This was an affectionate room, a room of life and relaxation in a house of stiff coffee table books that had never been opened, with gleaming glass cupboards which held cutlery and crockery that would never be used, a house of creamy marble surfaces and modern, upright furniture.

Her grandmother's little statuettes had been knocked from their stands. Nikki's sandals crunched through the pieces of pensive shepherds, innocent children, dogs in poses of happy playfulness. Her dad's favourite painting, one by Marjorie Wallace, had been slashed and hung skew. Photographs, their glass frames shattered and the photos torn, made her feel sick. Pages from Liza's favourite novels were torn, random pages decorating the Persian carpet. She wondered which book it was from, Liza would know. She felt tears threaten and lifted her eyes. The big screen television had been torn from its wall bracket. Cables and electric connections

reached towards the television lying on its face. Her sister's laptop had been thrown against a wall. Some of the keyboard keys had come loose and lay between the other broken possessions. The sight of the little alphabet letters, so violently loosened from their proper place, was what made her collapse onto the couch. She felt something digging into her palm, glass, china, something, but ignored it. Most of the items here belonged to her parents. But the laptop. It was Liza's life. Her photos, her music, her diary, her story.

"It looks like your sister interrupted a burglary."

Nikki shook her head. "He didn't even try to take the valuable stuff. Why did he break the TV?"

"Maybe too big to take with?" Michael was turning on the spot, his eyes darting around the room, seemingly trying to place or catalogue all the bits of brokenness. He shook his head as though giving up the task.

Nikki sat forward and put her hands over her eyes. "What happened? Where's Liza?" Her voice was breaking. She swallowed and lifted her hands. "There's a blood stain on the stairs."

"Shit." Michael's green eyes were cast down. He was looking at the pieces of glass, he picked some of them from the couch and dropped them to the floor, before sitting down opposite her. "Have you tried calling her cell? Maybe she went somewhere to hide."

Nikki looked around. Where had she left her bag? "Um..." She stood up. Her legs were shaking. Her bag lay where Michael had dropped it by the front door. She tried to find the phone between towel, sunscreen and things she couldn't even remember putting in the massive bag. Finally, she just spilled the contents out onto the tiles, grabbing for the phone. There were two missed calls. Her finger was shaking so badly, and she tried to type too fast, only ending up mistyping the password the first few times. She swore, wanted to throw the phone at the wall, and then forced herself to type the numbers deliberately, slowly. One missed call was from Angie, the other from Camilla. She hated her friends then, hated that the calls hadn't been from her sister. She dialled Liza's number and cursed when she had to wait for the call to be connected. The number rang. And rang.

It was ringing somewhere in the house.

Nikki got up. She followed the sound of the phone.

“Hey.” Michael was crouched down, his hand reaching into the innards of the couch. “Got it.” He pulled out the sleek phone.

The ringing stopped and the Nikki heard the voicemail message come on.

“Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Nikki disconnected the call. The joke, they’d both put the same message on their voicemail, now felt like a threat. “She would never just leave her phone. Maybe she went next door for help? I should call someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“The police?”

Nikki looked up. Michael was leaning forward on the tip of his seat, his hands folded together, almost as though he was praying. With his thin body, he looked almost like a praying mantis, bony elbows sticking out weirdly.

“Yes.”

She called from the house line. The woman on the far side of the airwaves sounded bored. Nikki explained the situation.

“Reporting a housebreaking and a robbery.” Nikki could hear that the woman was writing down each word, her syllables were stretched out and spoken in slow motion. “What’s the address?”

Nikki repeated it. She spoke quickly, before the woman could ask another question. “But my sister was at home and now I can’t find her.”

“We’ll send someone shortly.”

Nikki bit her lip. “What is the procedure for reporting a missing person?”

“But you are reporting a robbery.”

“Yes, but my sister is gone as well. Her phone is still here, her handbag is still here, and the car is here. She’s missing.”

“To report a missing person you should come down to the police station, miss. Then we can fill in all the forms.”

Nikki growled in frustration. “I thought you said to wait here for the people you’re sending?”

“Yes.”

“Shit.” She closed her eyes, hoping that the breathy curse hadn’t crossed the phone lines. She ground her teeth and emphasised each short word, like firecrackers, hoping that their sound would incite some sort of action. “Just send them soon.”

The policewoman had promised to send a car. To send someone to ask questions and write down a statement and to play a bit part in a scene they knew line for line after having played it numerous times. The woman had sounded so bored. Nikki slammed an open palmed hand against the closest wall. She was sure they hadn’t understood how bad it was. Probably just assumed she was another party girl who’d left the front door open and had been robbed. She should have been more forceful on the phone. She wondered if she should call back. She looked around the room.

“Michael?”

“In here.”

He stood in the kitchen.

“What are you looking at?”

“It looks like she was interrupted.” He pointed to the kitchen counter.

Nikki stepped into the room. Liza had used one of the square plates. Their mother loved the oddly shaped dinnerware. The cheese was peeling out from between the slices of bread. A glass stood beside the half-eaten meal.

Michael put a hand on her arm, stopping her before she walked further into the kitchen, and pointed down to the floor in front of them. “There’s some water on the floor here and broken glass.” He stood aside. Nikki bent down, touching the wet shards of glass, turning them over. She looked up at Michael. “What happened? Where is she?” Nikki stood up, wiping her hand on her sundress.

“I was just thinking.” Michael put a hand on Nikki’s waist and steered her from the kitchen and onto the wooden bench in the entrance hall. “If there was someone in the house, I mean, if someone was trying to break in, where would she have gone?” His arm released her and she sat down on the wooden bench.

“If she could, she would have locked herself in one of the bedrooms and called the police or pressed the panic button. That’s what Dad always said to do. Or she would have run away. Either way, she would have called for help and would have been back here by now.” Nikki shook her head. “Hey, open the door. I want to keep an eye out for the police.”

Michael unlocked the door and allowed it to open wide, the handle slamming into the wall. Nikki knew that it would leave a mark. Mom would freak. Liza would have winced at the mark, usually Nikki would have scoffed. Today she didn’t even make a sarcastic remark. The sunlight crept into the house, falling neatly on the package next to the door.

Miss West

She bent down and lifted it onto the bench, next to her. She tore open the one edge. As she pulled at it, the box lifted off the couch. It was really light. Nikki held the box steady with her one hand and continued tearing with the other one.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t know.”

The tape was stuck and she focussed on the box. The tape finally came loose, leaving long tears in the cardboard. Nikki leant over so that she could see into the box.

She threw the box from her. It landed upright on the other side of the wooden bench. Nikki wiped her hands on her dress again. She stood up, moving backwards, away from the package.

“Call the police.”

“What?” Michael came closer. He reached out, wanting to open the box as well.

“Don’t touch it!”

Michael lifted the edge with his forefinger.

“Fucking idiot, I told you not to touch it!”

“What is that?” Michael was leaning forward. Nikki could see the long line of his back forming an archway, overshadowing the horrific gift that had been left. He moved even closer to the object beneath him, his hair falling across his face. “Hang on, is that—”

His back snapped back into place and he spun around to face Nikki. Nikki placed her hands over her mouth, pushing her one finger into her mouth and biting down it to stop the screams

inside. Both of them were trembling. Michael took off to the kitchen. She could hear him punching buttons on the telephone.

Nikki stepped closer again, drawn by the same fascination that forces other drivers to slow down when passing car accidents and fuels the horror movie industry. She bent forward again, looking into the box and felt her jaw clench even tighter and the teeth pushing harder into her flesh, almost feeling as though they were going to touch the bone.

Chapter 2: Oppressive Heat

Michael called the police again. Nikki sat outside on the steps with her whole body shaking and shivering, even with the sun burning her shoulders and neck. At the sound of an engine, she lifted her eyes - a black, unmarked car stood in front of the gate. Waves of heat radiated from the bonnet. The result of burning on the inside and the outside. The heat moved like a curtain, shading those inside the vehicle from her view. Her back and shoulder muscles tensed. She shaded her eyes with her hand, and pressed her lips tightly together – she felt her shoulders tense further. Michael touched her shoulder. For a moment, she thought he was trying to massage her.

“Where is the gate remote?”

She looked up. He moved his hand and turned away. He must have read some sort of answer in the line of her jaw, in the narrowing of her eyes, or in something else. She heard his sandals slap the tiles on his way back into the house. She didn’t know where the remote was. She couldn’t think. She didn’t want to look back to the gate, she knew they were there. She could hear the engine buzzing, a fly attracted to sweaty bodies, open wounds. They were waiting at the gate, watching her, through unknown eyes. The gate opened. The car slowly slid up the driveway as though its occupants were on a lazy Sunday afternoon drive. Nikki was still sitting when the two police officers unstuck their backs from their seats and slouched out of the car.

“Good afternoon, we got a call about a possible robbery and a missing person.” The older man spoke. He was almost as short as his female counterpart. From where Nikki sat on the step, she could see little droplets of sweat beading just below his grey sideburns. He nodded at Michael and then at her. “Miss West?” He took off his sunglasses and took the first two steps almost as though his knees were aching. He held out a hand with two scars on the back, running criss-cross with dark blue veins standing up. “Detective Maritz.”

Nikki lifted her eyes without raising her head. She didn’t want to take the hand, didn’t want to feel the sweaty palm or the throbbing of the enlarged veins. Maritz waited, keeping his eyes on her. Michael, oh, how she wanted to take hold of his ankle and trip him, took a step forward and shook the detective’s hand. She ground her teeth. These people had to know that this wasn’t some sort of easy Sunday afternoon visit. This was serious, and they had kept them waiting.

Maritz turned and gestured towards the woman standing behind him. "Warrant Officer September." September was frowning into the sunshine. She was dressed in an official police uniform. Nikki felt her heart beat faster, some remnant of childhood respect for the uniform.

Maritz put his sunglasses on again. "Can we go inside?"

Nikki nodded. For a moment, she wondered if her wobbly legs would hold her, but she pushed herself upright and led the way into the house. Her shoulders had burnt during the wait and she felt the skin stretching taunt with each movement. She paused in the entrance hall. "Um, what," she swallowed rising bile, "what now?"

"Tell us what happened. Were you out? What did you see when you came into the house?"

"Um, yeah, we were at the beach." She gestured to Michael. "When we came back, the door was unlocked. Liza, my sister, she'd never leave the door open. Never. So I called her name and we were looking for her in the house. That's when Michael saw all that." She pointed towards the living room. "Things broken and smashed and a glass broken in the kitchen and there, on the stairs, I found some blood." She took a shuddering breath and groaned. She bent forward, resting her one hand on her knee and holding the other one in front of her mouth. "I feel sick." Two hands, cooler than her sun-touched skin, took hold of her shoulders and steered her towards the bench in the entrance hall. She felt the wood pressing into the back of her thighs. It was an antique. Her mom had thought that it was a perfect replica of benches found in art galleries. It was placed in front of the art-wall, a piece of art itself as well, just there to complete the look her mom had imagined. The solid wood comforted her. Her head was still hanging down and her eyes came to rest on at the feet in front of her, dark shoes to go with the black shirt. He took a step back. Michael knelt down next to her.

"Do you want some water?"

Nikki shook her head. "I'm okay. Just dizzy. I think it's the heat as well." She sat up. "My sister was home. Her handbag is here. And her cell phone and house keys. I don't know - I don't know where she is."

The detective had taken out a notepad and was taking notes. He cleared his throat. "From what time where you out?"

Nikki glanced at Michael. He was still kneeling down. “Ummm. Hang on.” He stood up and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “You must’ve picked me up at about eleven. I’ve got a message from you at 10:48, saying that you were on your way.”

“And we got back here just after two.” Nikki added.

“Where did you go?”

“Voëlklip beach.” Michael answered.

“How long have you two been dating?”

“We just met each other a few days ago at a live music show. We’re not really dating. It’s just like, you know, a summer thing.” Nikki lifted her chin.

“A few days.” Maritz looked at each of them in turn, as he repeated the words. He scribbled them down in his notebook. “And something happened here between eleven and two. That’s not a very long timeframe.”

Nikki nodded. “I think somebody tricked her. When we came in there was this box next to the front door. I was too worried about Liza to look in here at first, but when we checked it –” She waved an arm to indicate the box.

September pulled out latex gloves from her pocket. She carefully opened the top flaps and stepped back so that Maritz could look inside. Maritz clicked his pen and inserted it into the box. He moved it around, inspecting the objects from afar. She waited until Maritz had finished his long distance exploration, before carefully inserting her fingers into the dark interior.

She pulled out a note, typed out on white printer paper, the kind available in almost any shop. The other hand pulled out a cut plait of long brownish-blond hair. The plait had started unravelling, but most of the hair was still held neatly together. There were dark stains on it, just here and there, but they stood out clearly against the strands, just as clearly as the stain had been on the beige floor. Warrant Officer September held out the note to Maritz, who pulled out a pair of reading glasses. He leant over the note without touching it and read the note aloud.

“We have Elizabeth West. You will be contacted shortly. Have the money ready.” Maritz pulled off his reading glasses, delicate pieces of glass in bulky blue and grey frames. “Phew.” He wiped the glasses on his shirt, before tucking them into the collar of his shirt. “That both complicates matters and makes it easier.”

Nikki closed her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek, before raising her head again. “Explain.”

Nikki felt September’s eyes resting on her for a moment, but Maritz was still looking at the box. He nodded to himself. Nikki felt her muscles twitch and itch, and she gave in to the frustration she felt by standing up and positioning herself directly in front of Detective Maritz.

He lifted his eyes from the box and nodded once more. “With a missing person, an adult, you’ll have to wait a few days before we could start looking for her. With this, well, this allows us to act immediately. First thing we need to do is circulate her photograph to all our officers and traffic officials. We need to start the search for her as soon as possible. She might still be in the area. Do you have any pictures of your sister?”

Nikki looked around for her phone, finally finding it between the torn pillows on the couch. “Here.” She opened up the photo album application and turned the screen towards him.

“How recent is it?”

“It was taken last week, the night we arrived.”

A German tourist at the restaurant table next to them had taken the photo and it was a little blurry. Looking down at it though, she felt an intense ache barrel through her. The sisters had gone out for dinner to celebrate Liza’s exam results. They both were both being extra nice and cautious. Treading carefully around old landmines and fights. They had worked hard to be jovial, both laughing a little too much. They had laughed about the romantic atmosphere and had told each other made up mythologies about the other patrons. The candlelight illuminated the blonde strands in Liza’s hair. She’d dyed it darker the previous week – Mom and the hairdresser had convinced her that it would make her look more professional before she started a new job in January – but some of the colour was already washing away, allowing a few white-blond hairs to shine through. Liza was slightly heavier than Nikki and a little shorter. Their faces looked like they might have been twins, except that Liza’s cheeks were rounder and her eyes blue, not brown like her sister’s. They had their arms around each other, lifting empty glasses and smiling. It had been their first night at the holiday house. The first time seeing each other since Easter. The first time they were just having fun together in ages.

“Are you sure this is your sister’s hair?” The female officer spoke; she was still holding the plaited hair. She had a softer voice than Nikki expected. Melodic even. Pity her Afrikaans accent made the words feel flat.

Nikki nodded. It was grotesque. She felt sick looking at it. She looked down at floor, taking deep breaths.

“Miss West, is there any information that you think we need to know?” Officer September paused for a second, not really waiting long enough for Nikki to answer before continuing.

“Does your sister have any enemies? Bad break-ups? A jealous boyfriend?”

“I don’t know much about her social life. We don’t see each other much anymore.” She lifted her head. Her eyes widened, her heart pounded. “Oh fuck. There is one thing you should know. She doesn’t have her bag with her. This is serious. Liza is a diabetic. Type one. She needs insulin. There’s always an emergency stash in her bag, but if the guy who took her didn’t know about it, then they wouldn’t have taken it.” Her hands were shaking as she pulled her fingers through her hair, the beach hardened strands catching between the digits. “Oh no, no, no. I need to check her bag.” Nikki knew she’d seen the handbag somewhere, but it took her a few moments before she abandoned the search in the living room and found it in the kitchen. She yanked it open and pulled out the insulin pens, the testing strips and a few hand full of sweets.

“What will happen if she doesn’t get her medicine?” Detective Maritz, September and Michael had all followed her into the now cramped kitchen.

“There’s all sorts of effects. Her diabetes is mild, but she’ll still have symptoms. If she doesn’t get her medicine soon, there’s a possibility that she’ll fall into a coma. She could die.”

“What’s soon? How many days do we have?”

“Two, maybe more, probably less. Depends if she gets food and lots of water.” She pressed her fingers into her skull, wanting to tear it open. “We have to get her back before then.”

“We’ll do everything we can.” Maritz made a note. “I’ll let the police officers know that if they spot her, they should also call an ambulance. Now, have you informed your parents?”

“No.” Nikki pulled a face. “No. They’re away. Liza was better at keeping tabs on them.” Nikki said. There was silence for a few seconds, as though Maritz and September expected her to continue, to explain. She gave a little half shrug with her one shoulder, the sunburnt skin pulled tight and she quickly stopped.

Maritz cleared his throat. “It is essential that they are here and aware of what is happening.” The police officer placed the end of his pen on the writing pad, paused and ready. “What is your parent’s number?”

Nikki sighed. "Maybe I should call them?"

"It will be best if we called them." The voice was reassuring.

Nikki nodded and pulled out her phone. She searched through her phonebook. Liza would have known the number out of her head. "Um," she cleared her throat, "here is my dad's number." She read it quickly, watching over the top of her phone as the pen scribbled across the pad. "And my mom's." She read out the second number. She looked up at Maritz when his scribbling pen had faithfully recorded the information. She met his eyes. "Call my dad first, okay?"

"May I?" Maritz indicated the phone visible on the kitchen counter.

"Sure."

September nodded her head at Michael and he followed her into the dining room. It all seemed like this was a well-known dance to the police officers, they knew the steps, the music, even the expected reactions of their audience. Nikki left the kitchen and sat down on the bench, feeling clumsy and lost in the pattern forming around her.

Voices came from either side. September was asking a question, the inflection of her voice carrying through the dining room doorway. Michael answered, his voice subdued. Nikki didn't listen to that conversation though. Maritz's voice carried easily from the kitchen.

"Mr West, this is Detective Maritz from the Hermanus Police Service. I need to speak to you urgently concerning your daughter, Elizabeth West."

He clearly stated a number where he could be reached. No pauses. That meant the police officer was leaving a voicemail message. She knew her father hated listening to voicemail messages. Maybe he would listen to this one if he saw the phone call came from their Hermanus number. Maybe he would assume it was from Liza. Until he listened to the message.

"Hey."

She looked up. Michael was standing in the doorway.

"Um, so the police said that I could go. I gave them my phone number and address."

"How are you getting home?" Nikki pulled a hand through her hair again, the fingers getting tangled in the same spots as before.

"Dom's outside."

“Right.” Nikki knew that Michael was waiting for her to say something more. “I’ll walk out with you.”

Dom’s red Audi stood right in front of the gate. His eyes focussed on the police car, his sunglasses pushed up onto his head. He leant out of the window, tapping his cigarette against his fingers to allow the ash to drop to the ground. Nikki opened the gate. She and Michael stepped through together.

“Hey, Nikki. I’m sorry to hear about what happened. I didn’t even know your sister was here.”

Nikki glanced at Michael.

He squeezed her arm, but avoided her gaze. “Call me if you need anything.” He moved his hand and walked round to the passenger side.

“Right. Just don’t spread this around too much. My parents don’t even know yet. If someone hears who isn’t supposed to it could be bad.”

“Yeah, sure.” Michael said, opening the car door.

“Sure. No worries.” Dom blew the last breath of smoke out and dropped his cigarette stump to the ground.

Michael got into the car. Nikki walked around the passenger side and crouched down a little so that she could look in through the window. She cleared her throat. “I’m serious, Michael. If anything comes out about my sister on the news, Twitter, Facebook or anywhere else, my father will put his lawyers onto you. This isn’t some sort of social event, this is real. My sister’s life could be in danger if you leak anything. Even to friends.” She looked across at Dom. “Understand?”

Dom nodded, Michael sat without moving, still not turning his head to look at her. Dom leaned over the gears and hand brake, holding his hand out to her, his arm grazing Michael’s chest. “Hey, don’t stress. We just want to be here for you.”

Nikki looked at the offered hand for a few seconds, before she took it. “Thanks. I’ll call.”

Dom squeezed her hand, smiled from beneath his sunglasses and nodded goodbye.

She waited until they had driven out of the cul-de-sac, before heading back into the house. She wondered what attracted her to that type of guy? Michael had seemed like a nice enough boy, but now he was starting to annoy her. The only things they had in common were a love for

local rock music and that they both were looking for someone to have fun with. Warrant Officer September was waiting for her by the door.

“Who was that?”

“Michael’s friend. They’re on holiday here.”

“So you met them both a few days ago?”

“Yeah. Well, mostly I met Michael. Dom skipped out of the show early, I think he met someone there, you know.” She wondered if this woman did. She looked too tight, too squeezed and held in to know. “It was a crappy venue, but a great band. We met at the bar and started chatting.”

“Hmm. Did Liza go with?”

“No. She’s got a thing about crowds and she would have hated the band anyway. And she has to be really careful about how much she drinks with her diabetes, so it puts a bit of a damper on going out with her. She’s always been *really* responsible.” She stretched out the word and then blinked. She hadn’t meant to sound bitter or sarcastic, but the expression on the other woman’s face told her that she’d missed the balance of admiring sister and crossed into the jealous zone.

Nikki pushed past the officer, but just as she was past, September called her back again. “Can you open the gate? Our finger print experts are here.”

“Oh, right.” Nikki pressed the remote again and watched as the police car, clearly marked this time, blue lights on, pulled into her parents’ driveway. They parked next to her father’s Mercedes, their lights bouncing off the paintwork, competing with the sunlight. She could see the neighbours looking over their fences and staring through the slated wood gates. She could see their faces peering greedily into her home as she shut the gate. The little boys from across the road were pointing to the police car and calling to their mother. She could see them bouncing up and down. The father snuck a peak over the wall.

September nodded toward the faces beyond the gate. “We will be talking to your neighbours, to ask if they’ve seen anything unusual. We are only going to tell them that there has been a robbery. We don’t want anything to get into the news about your sister.”

Nikki nodded, feeling a tiredness enfolding her. As she stepped into the house, she heard the phone in the kitchen start to ring. Maritz’s voice travelled, greeting her father with the correct

amount of gravity in his voice. Nikki tried to swallow her anxiety, but found it getting stuck in her chest. Things like this happened to happy families, not to theirs.

Chapter 3: Panic

There was a drum playing within her head. And not just a drum beat, a drum solo in a heavy metal band. She groaned and lifted her hand to her forehead. She had wanted to lift one arm, but both had moved together. She tried to pull her arms apart, but they were tied together. Something like plastic? Cable ties, maybe. She pulled again and whimpered as the skin bruised. Wherever she was, it felt as though she was moving. But the motion was strange, like a shifting about instead of moving forwards. She wondered if the rocking movement had woken her. She tried to shake the headache from her head, and when that didn't work, she closed her eyes tightly, before opening them to smothering darkness once more.

She was lying on her back. The surface was rough and hard. She shifted her shoulders. It felt like wood. A wooden floor. She lifted her arms from her chest, reaching upwards, and then stopped. There was something above her as well. Her fingers shoved against this new barrier, she skimmed the surface and drew in her breath sharply as splinters bit into her flesh when another sudden rocking motion moved her hands against the surface she was gingerly exploring. She lowered her hands again, resting them on her chest. She clenched her hands into fists. She was shaking.

She tried to take a deep breath. The air was heavy and it tasted of rust. It was old and hard somehow.

Liza turned to one side and stretched out her hands. However, as soon as she'd gone a few centimetres, her hands hit another barrier. She quickly turned on her other side. She wanted to check where she was. She needed to be sure. Her arms, however, seemed stuck to her chest. Her breathing was fast and fractured. Liza pressed her eyes tightly shut and wished to wake up in her bed or on the couch or anywhere familiar and safe. When she opened her eyes, it was still completely dark and solid around her. She could feel the sides pressing in on her. One more option – she reached out hoping that her hands would just feel air.

Another side.

She was trapped. The heat and stuffiness of old air pressed down on her chest. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. She lifted her hands to her face, pressing sweaty palms into her

eyes, her hands were shaking so much. She lifted the joined wrists, pulling them higher, over her forehead, allowing her fingers to tangle themselves in her hair. There was something strange in her hair. Semi-liquid, crusty. On the left side of her hairline, there was a tender spot. She pulled at the strands, wanting to feel real pain, be sure she was alive. Her fingers travelled along the fragile strands and stopped. She'd run out of hair. Her memories lit up the darkness. Panic collapsed on her, crushing her like a rockslide down the mountain.

*

There were sounds in the background, but they were meaningless. The only thing that mattered was the shrieking voice that filled the small space around her. She heard someone kicking or hitting wood. She heard other voices. She heard a lock being opened. The shrieks continued.

Please stop please stop please stop please stop...

She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think.

Please stop please stop please –

There was light. Her head burst with pain but she couldn't close her eyes. The voice was growing hoarse, but the screaming was still as loud as when it had started. Water hit her face. Somebody was throwing water into her face, her hair, her neck. She felt it in her eyes and tasted it in her mouth. She choked and the screaming stopped. She coughed, forcing droplets from her lungs and pulling in fresh air. Her throat was raw. This pain alerted the rest of her body. Her hands were burning, her knees stiff, her back in spasm, her head throbbing, every muscle tense and trembling. She wanted to throw up. She was crying and scared and she didn't know where she was and...Whose arms were around her?

She started screaming again. The voice wasn't hers. It was hoarse, broken and sounded as though her vocal cords had been replaced by rocks rubbing coarsely against each other.

“Shut up! Shut up!” The arms around her became tighter, they were crushing her ribs, forcing the breath from her lungs. The one hand moved higher, grasping her breast, squeezing.

She couldn't scream anymore, no breath, no voice. She tried to move her arms, to force the man behind her to reposition, to let go of her, but he kept his arms and hands where they were.

“Urgh. Where did all the blood come from?” The man holding her put his head next to hers, his breath touched her ear. She shivered convulsively, an eerie feeling causing her spine to spasm.

The other man knelt down, coming down to her level. He reached out and she tried to jerk away, but the arms held her still. His fingers explored her face. He touched a few tender places, causing her to flinch and pull away, but his fingers lingered there, pushing harder against the skin and skull. He dropped his hand and stood up. He was tall, muscular. He still wore the button-up shirt with the courier logo on it.

“It’s just from where she cut herself when she fell. Clean her up.”

“With what?”

The tall man in front of her reached for something and before they could react, he had emptied another bottle of water over both of them. Liza’s captor started swearing. Liza coughed, feeling water and diluted blood rushing down over her face and chest. She shook her head, hoping to clear some of the water from her eyes.

“That’s better.” The tall man squatted down again. He put his finger in front of his mouth. “Shh. Shh.” He took the finger away. “Be quiet and we won’t hurt you. Okay?”

Liza nodded. She didn’t want to look into his eyes, so she focused above him. Only then did she realise that she was in the back of a car. No, not a car, a bakkie or panel van. There were shelves along the sides of the van and netting stretching from the top to the bottom where something must be holding it in place. Above her, the same shelves and netting ended at about the middle of the van. She was sitting next to a box. It looked like the toolbox in her parents’ garage. Just longer, wider. Like a coffin. Panic coursed through her and she sagged forwards. That was where she had been. Inside there. It felt like rocks and mud squashing her, how she had always imagined it must feel to be buried alive, the feeling of claustrophobia compressing her, even though she was in an open space. Her head rested on her chest, her eyes tracing the hairs on the arms around her.

“Can we take her into the house?” The voice was behind her, his hand still on her breast.

“No. It’s too early. We have to take her in when it’s dark out.” A hand closed over her chin and lifted her face until she was looking right at him, into his eyes. “Girl, we’re going to put you back in there.” He nodded towards the coffin-box.

Liza whimpered.

“Just for a couple of hours. But you need to be quiet. Okay? We want this to be over as well. So if you cooperate everything will be okay. Nod if you agree.”

Liza swallowed. “Please don’t put me back in here. I’ll be quiet. Please, please.”

The man sighed. “You don’t get to negotiate. You either do what we want or we drug you and force you.”

Liza felt her chest tighten.

“Do you understand?” He paused. “Or am I getting the drugs and gag?”

“Please. I can’t go back in there. Just let me go, I won’t tell anybody about this. Please, I’ll be quiet, just don’t put me in there.”

“Hold her.”

“No! Let me go! You can’t do this!” Liza fought against the arms, but they tightened around her. She kicked out with her legs, mostly making loud banging noises where her feet hit the bottom of the van. “No!”

The man in front of her took out a little pouch. It looked like one of the vanity bags she owned, black and sleek. He unzipped it and took out a syringe and some sort of bottle. He filled the syringe.

“Grab her arm.”

Liza screamed. She stopped begging. She was just screaming, hoping that her voice would carry beyond the metal walls of the van, hoping that her screaming would frighten them or someone would hear her.

The man behind her pulled her one arm away from her body. He twisted it around, so that the inside of the arm showed a visible target for the approaching syringe. Her voice cracked and broke. The tall man knelt down and pushed the needle in. The pitch of her scream changed into something higher, pain and fear and horror formed the chorus and she felt herself slipping away. The screaming stopped.

*

When she woke again, she didn't open her eyes. Better to keep them closed. To hide in the darkness. She pulled her hands closer to her chest. How long has she been out? It felt like minutes, but it could be the next day already. She couldn't tell. Liza lifted her hands even higher, until her fingers brushed her lips. She was so thirsty. Her throat was tight and sore. She put her hands over her mouth, pressing down as hard as she could. Her stomach growled. She tried to remember if she'd finished her lunch. Something clicked. Her insulin. She'd always kept emergency pens in her handbag. She prayed, quickly and fervently, that they had also grabbed her bag when they took her. What if they hadn't? Easy, that was the first thing doctors explained when you were diagnosed: As intricate and amazing as the human body was, sometimes it would do stupid things. Her body stupidly attacked the insulin producing beta cells in the pancreas. Insulin was needed to regulate blood glucose levels. Glucose is the fuel of the body, and without it being properly broken down, she would soon start feeling symptoms related to glucose toxicity. She just hoped they brought her emergency kit or her handbag. She needed to focus on something else. Something outside of this box.

Would Nikki know that she was gone by now? What would she do? Liza had seen enough movies to know that eventually the men would call her family with some demands. Probably money. Her parents would be able to afford it, depending on how much they asked. Her parents would be persuaded pretty quickly, depending on what the men threatened.

She didn't want to think about that.

She had to think about something else.

Liza thought about the past week. She hadn't wanted to come to the empty holiday house in the first place. There was no reason for her to come to Hermanus. She didn't like the ocean. She didn't like the crazy bustle of a town filled with tourists and holidaymakers. She preferred hiding out in the city, just until all the tourists left. She could never understand why people went to tourist destinations or holiday towns – the only thing you really saw there were other tourists. But Nikki had pouted and complained about being alone at Christmas. The guilt trip had been too much, especially after their last fight. The time they were spending apart was bringing out the rougher edges of their personalities. Living under the same roof, they had helped balance each other out. Nikki had asked her to come to Cape Town. She'd read Nikki's invitation as an olive branch, a white flag, a peace treaty. Maybe even a time to talk. But Cape Town was foreign territory to her. The friends were Nikki's, the places they would go would be Nikki's choices. They needed somewhere neutral. So she made a counter offer – Hermanus.

Nikki had whined. Liza had nagged. They both complained and packed their bags and travelled to their parents' holiday house.

Nikki had been her usual bratty self. Liza loved her sister but why couldn't she just sit still and relax? She had to go out. She had to go partying. She had to meet someone to have fun with. Liza knew that her sister thought she was boring. Nikki knew that Liza thought her frivolous and temperamental. They were still trying to give each other space though. With Nikki out all the time, Liza had decided to use her time productively – she would finish her novel. Fortunately, she'd brought her laptop.

She was sitting on the couch, her laptop balanced on her lap and the dim blue light competing with the bright daylight streaming through the windows behind her. She wore denim shorts with a red heart on the right pocket – a remnant of her undergrad days, and a red strappy top with lace decorating the bodice and loose fitting material over her stomach. She'd promised herself that she would exercise more during these holidays, but with the mornings and the evenings equally sweltering, her resolution had faded a little and the flab remained. She stretched and yawned. She felt lost in her book. No, that was false. The book was lost somewhere inside her.

She'd decided that the Hermanus holiday house was the perfect place to write her novel. Next year, with her new job, she wouldn't have time to write. She stretched and listened to the peace, which filled the house. She watched the silent progress of the mouse across her screen and clicked in random places on the half-written page open on her laptop. She sighed again and clicked back on the open game of Solitaire. She lazily moved the cards, until there were no more moves left. Damn. She closed the games and read the last sentence she'd written. It was good. But not perfect. She tilted the screen forward and then backward. She changed the background on the screen. Then she read the whole paragraph she had typed earlier. What needed to come next? The story had felt so perfect in her mind but everything she got onto the page seemed too little, the bare minimum of what she wanted it to be. She stretched her arms out above her head, balancing the laptop on her legs. Once she'd saved the document, she opened her web browser. She felt like cooking. Or baking. Something creative. Something to give this house some life. Her parents only visited the house occasionally. It was supposed to be their dream house, but most of their holidays were spent abroad. This time, Thailand.

Inside the box, Liza lifted her hands and pressed them against her eyes. She tried to remember which island they would be touring today. Her father had emailed her the whole itinerary, just

in case. All she knew was that it was some touristy place, some place that a million other people had already visited and photographed and enjoyed and thousands more would follow the next year.

Nikki was at one of the local beaches, flirting with her latest conquest. Liza hadn't felt like playing audience to another budding romance. Nikki had tried to tempt her with a promise of a blind date. Something about one of Michael's friends who was beyond yummy. She'd laughed and declined. No, thank you. Anyway, she hated the feeling of gritty sand between her fingers and toes. In a few years, she might not have to worry about feeling the grains of sand though. Most diabetics tended to suffer from numbness or tingling in their extremities. Although she was maddingly precise with her treatment and medicine, she knew that statistically she probably wouldn't be able to avoid all the complications associated with the disease.

Complications. If she didn't get her medicine, she wouldn't have to wait to find out about the future possible complications. She tried to swallow, her throat worse than parched. She couldn't even work up a bit of spittle to ease the dryness. She lifted her hands and tried pushing against the wooden lid, hoping that the men might have forgotten to lock it. It wouldn't budge. Her body was stiff. She wanted to turn on one of her sides, but her tied hands prevented her from balancing and moving around. She gave her head a slight shake and flinched with the sudden striking headache. Better to think of something else. The morning had felt so normal. Normal had changed into something terrifying so fast.

She'd continued to procrastinate until it was lunch time. She had so many friends who just skipped meals when they wanted to lose weight. She couldn't afford to. Her friends had also learned that she couldn't be invited to brunch, or a late lunch or a midnight braai; or if she was invited she'd bring her own snacks along. Her meals were punctual in the same way that military manoeuvres were planned and executed.

In the kitchen, she took out some low GI health bread, and cut up a tomato and slices of cheese. She got the cold water out of the fridge and poured herself a glass. She surveyed her meal. Right. Two carbohydrates, a vegetable, and some dairy. Very little dairy, but the two carbs were the actual problem. Her stomach growled. She wanted a sandwich, not just an open piece of bread, so she'd have to compensate for that. Her testing kit was in one of the kitchen cupboards. She readied the meter, the test strip and the lancet. Next she grabbed the hygiene soap and scrubbed her hands. The test strip slotted into the bottom of the meter and she made

sure to prick the side of her middle finger, the fingertips had more nerve endings. The little droplet of blood coloured the test strip. The result illuminated the digital display. Hmmm. A bit high. She calculated the amount of insulin she needed. Six units. She loaded it into the pen. She sat down at one of the kitchen chairs and put the end of the pen against her thigh. She shot the insulin into her body. The pain was fleeting, normal. She put the pen back in its pouch, slipping the pouch back into her handbag. She liked keeping the pouch close. The testing kit went back into the cupboard. She pulled the plate closer and took a bite out of her sandwich. She had just taken a second bite when the front gate bell interrupted her meal.

She got up and moved the net curtain to one side. There was a yellow delivery van parked in front of the gate. One of the hand-to-hand couriers. At the angle she stood, she couldn't see the logo or the name, but she recognised the type. The driver was keeping the engine running, while the other man was standing outside, shading his eyes with the clipboard.

"Hmmm. Damn." She took a large drink of water to wash the food down. She unlocked the front door and waved. "Hi there!" She stayed standing at the front door, trying to keep her bare feet in the shade.

"Afternoon." He called from the other side of the gate. "I have a parcel here for Miss..." he brought the clipboard down from his eyes and shaded it from the sun with his other hand, "Miss West."

"Yeah, that's me. Do I have to sign for it?"

He nodded. She pressed the remote to open the large gate. The pedestrian gate's electrical buzzer had broken the summer before and she didn't feel like running barefoot to manually unlock the gate. Instead of walking in, he climbed back into the van and the driver waited until the gate was fully open before driving in and pulling up in front of the door.

Liza took the steps down from the front door. The man who had spoken to her stepped out of the car. Now this was a yummy man, she thought. He was tall and looked like he went to the gym every day. His bare arms were muscular and shimmered with sweat in the midday sun. He had dark curly hair and dark, almost black, eyes. A strong, well-shaped chin and white teeth showing clearly in his smile. He looked like he could be a model. Maybe this was his day job. He held out the clipboard and a pen. Liza felt herself blush, a slow creeping pink colour that heated up her entire face and neck. How embarrassing. She quickly signed where indicated and waited as the man went round to the back of the van and fetched the package. They swapped

items, he got the clipboard back, and she took the parcel from him. It hardly weighed anything. She angled the top toward her and checked the name on the front:

Miss West

Maybe their parents had sent both gifts in one box this year. “Thanks. Merry Christmas.”

“Excuse me,” the man spoke just as she turned away, “but would it be possible for us to get some water? The heat is killing.” He smiled, his eyes crinkling slightly and a dimple showing on one of his cheeks.

“Um, sure, I guess. Let me go get it. Just hang on.”

She looked over her shoulder as she jumped up the steps. The driver was getting out of the car and came to stand next to his friend. His hair was a mousy brown, his shoulders slouched forward and he was rubbing his hands, almost as though they were cold. His cheeks were marked and scarred by childhood acne, his complexion spotty and uneven. There was a red glow on his cheeks which must have been caused by the heat. She felt a little sorry for the driver. He really wasn’t handsome. And standing next to the incredibly hot delivery guy, he seriously didn’t have a chance to impress. Liza shrugged inwardly, tossed the parcel on the wooden bench in the entrance hall. She walked past the mix of landscapes and abstract art her mother had started collecting from South African artists. The final picture was an old family portrait. She and Nikki were standing on either side of her parents, dressed in perfect white dresses, red belts and blonde curls settling on their shoulders. She turned from the pictures into the kitchen. The two glasses clanked on the marble counter and she filled them with water from the fridge. She picked them up, turned and froze.

“Could you please wait outside?”

The muscular delivery man didn’t move. He was blocking her exit from the kitchen. He took a step forward. She retreated to the far side of the kitchen island and cursed her stupidity.

“Listen, I don’t have a lot of money in the house.” She tried to think of everything she’d heard and read about self-defence and attackers. She tried to remember everything her parents had told her about security and what to do in an emergency. “And my sister is going to be home soon. Just take what you want, okay?”

He was shifting his weight from foot to foot, bending forwards slightly with one hand on the kitchen top. He licked his lips. Liza swallowed and cursed inwardly. She was stuck next to the fridge and oven, while the kitchen knives were on the side where he was. He followed her eyes and grinned. He picked up a knife and held it pointed at her.

“Come quietly.”

She threw the filled glasses at him. The one missed, shattering against the kitchen counter behind him, but the other hit him in the chest. She ran. From the corner of her eye, she saw the man lunging forwards. He grunted as his feet slipped on the spilt water and she turned the corner, racing for the front door. The front door! It was blocked by the other man. With a yell, he came towards her. Liza’s feet carried her automatically and firmly to the stairs and upwards – her bedroom: she could lock the door, she could call someone, she could press the panic button. She was already on the first few steps when a hand closed around her ankle. She cried out. She was falling. Her momentum carried her forwards and the sudden loss of balance brought her down onto the sharp steps. She had automatically turned her face to the side, and the sharp edge caught her on the side of the head. She lay dazed, the room swam, lights flashed. She groaned as she felt her body sliding downwards. For a moment, she thought that she was dreaming, that she was in the first few moments of sleep where the brain still clings to reality, while the dream has already started.

“We’re not supposed to kill her!”

“She’s alive, don’t worry.”

Her head was pounding, but thoughts were forming again. No, not dreaming, she was fighting real monsters. Her hands grabbed hold of the banister, but her fingers were still numb from the fall. They slipped from the banister to the steps, making a squelching sound as her sweat briefly stuck her palms to the tiles. She was at the bottom step. One of the men grabbed her shoulder and turned her around. She lay with her back propped up against the stairs, the uneven surface cutting into her spine and skin. The men stood like walls in front of her, blocking her view, blocking her way. The driver bent down, reaching for her arm. Liza pulled her arm away, holding it across her body, her fist clenched. He moved quicker than her dizzy mind could follow. She yelled when his hands closed over her arms, pinning her back against the stairs. Liza felt as though her spine was cracking.

“Let me go!”

He held her arms even tighter.

Liza took a deep breath and shouted. She called for help, for someone to save her. Someone would come. There were neighbours with a couple of kids across the road and an old couple next door. They had to be home. They had to see the delivery truck without anyone waiting beside it. She yelled even louder.

A hand, rough, tight, clamped down on her mouth.

“Shut up!” The delivery man was crouched down beside her. “Where’s the bloody gag?”

“In the car.”

“Freaking idiot. Shut her up.”

The hand that had been over her mouth was removed. She took a deep breath, but another hand replaced it and pressed her voice back into her mouth. She still carried on shouting. The man holding her down kept telling her to be quiet. Footsteps came closer. The largest kitchen cleaver materialised in front of her eyes. The delivery man held it. He pressed it against her throat. His face was calm, and so too his voice. “Shut up *now*.” The steel pushed closer.

Liza’s voice died in her throat.

“I’m going to take the knife away. Shut up and hold still.”

Liza nodded, feeling the knife graze her skin. The man pulled the knife away. He nodded to the man holding her. Both men were breathing deeply.

“Let her sit up.”

The driver grabbed her shoulder and pulled her up. Liza felt a wave of nausea crash over her. She moaned and let her pounding head rest on her chest. There was a sharp pain on the left side of her head. There was something warm there as well. Liquid. She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. “What do you want? Money?” Her voice sounded breathless, hoarse, drained.

The delivery man took hold of her hair. She thought that he was going to pull her head up, instead she felt the plait being pulled tight. She flinched and whimpered.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

A strange cutting sound, a tug and release, made her grab hold of the stairs. The sounds stopped and she looked up in horror. The knife rested in his one hand, and the other hand held her plait,

the shape still intact. The band held it together, but a few pale strands, almost invisible in the bright light, floated down to the ground in front of her. He threw it off to the side.

“Grab her arm.”

The driver obeyed. The other man pulled a little black case out of his pocket and knelt before her.

“You know, the money is the best incentive, but not the only one.” He had zipped open the case, rested it on his knee and pulled out a syringe and a small bottle. He filled the syringe.

She tried to pull away. She begged, she started crying.

“Come on, hold still! Shit.”

The needle pierced her skin. She watched as he pressed down the plunger, injecting something foreign, something horrible into her.

“There you go.” He pulled out the point. “Just relax.”

Liza felt a blackness coming closer, blotting out the daylight. Her head was even dizzier. She couldn’t hold up her neck anymore, her other muscles weren’t listening. The nightmare that had been hovering at the edge of her reason was coming closer again. She looked up at the two monsters looming above her. They had both stood up. She was lying against the stairs, no, she was slipping downwards. How much further could she go? The monsters from her nightmare were talking to each other, but she couldn’t understand the words. She was leaving them behind as she slid away, away, away.

*

Liza took a breath. She’d planned on it being a deep breath, but the air inside the box was getting thinner. She wiped the sweat from her face. There was the noise of a door opening, footsteps coming closer, the clicking of a lock. Liza drew a sharp breath and clenched her fists. The box opened. Liza narrowed her eyes, expecting to flinch in the light, but it was dark. At first, she couldn’t distinguish between the two shapes above her, beyond that one was holding a torch.

“Get up.” It was the delivery man’s voice.

She gasped, tasting the fresh evening air. She tried to use her tied hands to pull herself up. She felt sore and stiff, and the headache got worse with every movement she made. With the man’s

help, she finally stood up and carefully climbed out. The other man without the torch came closer. He lifted his hands and pushed something into her mouth, a piece of cloth, and tied it around her head. A gag. He grabbed her arm and led her to the edge of the van. The man with the torch shone it down to show the steps. Liza stumbled and would have fallen out of the van if he hadn't been holding her arm. Her bare feet touched stony gravel. The men had climbed down from the van and were standing on either side of her. They took hold of her arms and led her away into the darkening evening. There was just enough light for her to look around. They were in some sort of valley, almost at the bottom of it. A cottage surrounded by trees was a little way off. She looked to the top of the valley, a few lights flickered in windows above her, and as she looked, a car sped past on a road higher up. She stumbled and felt a smoother surface beneath her feet and, before she could look where she was going, she stubbed her toe against the step in front. They pushed her into the house. The front light was off, but there was a light on. She blinked in the brightness, seeing bright yellow cupboards, and dirty coffee mugs in the sink, before they dragged her through the kitchen and headed down a short passageway. The one door was open and they shoved her inside.

There was no furniture, besides a single mattress on the floor. A few errant strands of moonlight drifted through the window, high up on the wall. She heard footsteps behind her. She turned around, pulling down the gag and calling out for water, but the door slammed. She was alone again, in a different box. She sat down on the mattress, put her head in her hands and sobbed.

*

He lit a cigarette before dialling the number. He hadn't saved it on his phone, and after every call, he deleted his call history. If the call was returned, it would show up as an unknown number, the same was true for his number appearing on the other phone. It took a while to connect. The phone rang eight times. He counted.

"Yes?"

"It's done."

The other person didn't answer immediately. "Are you sure your guys are up to it?"

"Yes."

"Good. Keep to the plan then." There was a pause and the voice returned, but speaking quietly, a whisper directed into the mouthpiece. "I have to go."

The call disconnected. He stood for a while; his cigarette had started burning away. He dropped the butt and stepped on it.

Chapter 4: Questions

Nikki sat up. What had woken her? She listened. Nothing. She lay back. She hadn't really slept. She'd managed to close her eyes and doze just as the first pink, yellow hints of daylight started appearing over the ocean. Nikki threw off the fleece blanket she'd pulled over her legs and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She checked her cell phone. There was a message from Camilla, asking why she was ignoring her. Shit, Camilla was being a real bitch about the money. She hadn't meant to reverse into the fence and the scrape hadn't even been that bad. She couldn't believe the panel beaters had charged her half of her rent allowance to fix it. She didn't want her parents to find out. When she shared her dilemma, Camilla had been a good friend, understanding and helpful. But now she was becoming a nag. Nikki sighed, Camilla just had to be patient, she promised that she'd pay back the loan when university started, and that would be when Camilla got it. There was a message from Michael, checking that she was okay. A third message from her parents, telling her that they were on their way to the airport. They would arrive that evening. The police had said that they would be back early the next morning. When Maritz had asked her if she knew somebody she could go stay with, she'd had a blank moment. He suggested calling a friend to come stay with her, or asking one of the neighbours if they would be willing to let her stay for the night, or even booking into a hotel.

"No, it's okay. I'll stay here. I've got the panic button and everything. And they won't come back tonight, will they?"

"They might. And I haven't got men to spare. You understand that I won't be leaving any police resources here? The best I can do is to have a patrol car drive by when they're in the area."

She had felt the evening chill move through her. "I'll be fine."

And she was. She hadn't slept much, but she didn't think that she would've slept in a hotel or anywhere else anyway. Her thoughts were too vivid to allow for rest. She sat up, threw her legs over the side of the bed and stumbled into the bathroom. The shower washed the sand from her hair and the sleep from her eyes. Afterwards, in the kitchen, she made coffee, strong filter coffee, thinking of the large amount of police who would be moving through the house again. The doorbell rang.

“Miss.” Maritz nodded his greeting. He trooped through the door like an old friend. Warrant Officer September followed closely behind. Maritz had paused just inside the door, but September continued into the house. “Do you have your parents’ identity numbers with you? We need to check some things.”

“Um, I don’t. Sorry.”

“Right. Let’s start with yours then. What’s your number?” He took out his notebook and pen.

Nikki gave the detective her identity number.

“And your sister’s?”

“Um,” Nikki thought. “Her handbag is still in the living room. Her driver’s license will be in her wallet. What else do you need?” Nikki turned from the front door, heading toward the living room. She heard the Detective following her.

“We’ll start with that.”

“Why identity numbers? What is that going to help?”

The officer cleared his throat. “It helps us to perform some checks. Financial checks.”

Nikki paused as she was rummaging through the handbag. “You think that Liza might have organised this whole thing herself?” She closed the bag and held it with shaking hands. “Or that I did it? She’s my sister, you prick!”

“Miss, this is normal procedure. If you could just give me the license, please?”

“Fuck you.” She threw the bag at the detective and stomped out of the living room. At the door, she almost bumped into Warrant Officer September.

“Could we talk?”

Nikki swallowed. She nodded, trying to keep the swear words and rejections contained on her tongue. “Is there somewhere quiet where we can sit?”

“The dining room?” Nikki offered.

“Somewhere a bit more private?”

Nikki thought. She thought about the house, the nooks and spaces. She thought about the possible questions coming. She thought about calling her parents' lawyer. "Maybe the patio?" Nikki led the way outside.

"Ja. Perfect."

Once they were seated, Nikki took stock of her interrogator. Warrant Officer Carol September had sleek dark hair framing her plump cheeks and coming to rest on her shoulders. Her police uniform was stretched tight over her arms and buxom chest, and a thin sheen of sweat was already forming on her forehead, even though it was early in the day. Her eyes were light brown and slightly narrowed. Nikki imagined that she was also being carefully examined.

September cleared her throat and slipped out a small notebook. She clicked her pen twice and placed the point on the top of the page. "Miss West. Nicola, right?"

"Nikki. Everyone calls me Nikki." She saw the pen start to move on the notepad. "No. Spelt with two k's and an i."

"Nikki." The officer repeated, scratching out what she'd written and re-wrote the name, spelt correctly this time. "You can call me Carol." She looked up and smiled. Not a big, broad smile. Just a kind, 'let's be friends', smile. "Firstly, I'm here to help. We want to find your sister. We want to help your family. But to do that, we need to know as much as possible. Right?"

Nikki nodded.

"So I'm going to ask you a few questions. You told us that you and Michael were at the beach yesterday. That's why Elizabeth was at home alone." Nikki nodded. "Have you and Michael met before this December?"

"No. We met for the first time on Friday."

"Have you had sex with him?"

Nikki's jaw felt tight, the muscles straining between bone and skin. "That's none of your business."

"Please answer the question."

"No." This time she shrugged both shoulders. "I mean, it's not like we're dating."

"Oh, so you weren't planning on sleeping with him?"

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Really?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But now Liza is gone, and that’s more important. I probably won’t be seeing Michael again.”

“Have you had any contact with him since yesterday?”

“He sent me a message. He wanted to check how I was doing. That’s all.”

Carol September opened a folder and drew out a piece of paper. She placed it on the patio table between them. Nikki leant forward, it was some sort of form.

“We’d like your permission to check your beacons and billings information.”

Nikki picked up the form, trying to skim it quickly. “What is it?” She asked.

“This is for your cellular phone service provider. They’ll let us know if your phone was where you said it was during the time Liza was taken.”

“Fuck that!” Nikki threw the paper down on the table, sat back in the chair and crossed her arms.

Warrant Officer September tapped her pen on the paper. “You should sign it. If you really were at the beach, then you have nothing to worry about.”

Nikki closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes, she sat forward and held out her hand for the police officer’s pen. She started filling out the form.

Carol September cleared her throat. “Do you live here?”

“No.” Nikki wondered if she’d placed a bit too much emphasis on the negative. The word had sounded louder than she intended. “This is my parents’ holiday house.”

“Why aren’t your parents here then?”

Nikki didn’t answer. She first completed the form, placed the pen carefully back on the table, pushing both pen and form towards the police officer. “They’re travelling. They take their overseas holiday first and usually come back just in time for Christmas day.” Or sometimes not, but she wasn’t ready to admit family dysfunction quite yet.

“Where do you and Liza live?”

“Liza still stays at home in Jo’burg. She’s just finished a Master’s in Business Management or Human Resources or something at WITS. She changed courses after her first year and had to do a lot of subjects over. I always forget from what she changed to what. I’m studying at UCT’s drama department, starting my second year end of January. I have a flat in Cape Town.”

“Drama, hey? How are your studies going?”

Nikki smiled, thinking of her examination results. “Pretty good. No trouble or anything.”

“So who pays for your studies? I’ve heard the fees are shocking. Do you and Liza have bursaries?”

“Liza got a bursary for her masters. She’s always been really clever. My dad still supports me. He’s got a couple of really successful businesses.”

“What type?”

“He believes in being diversified. He started out in import-export. Then he started a manufacturing business, but sold it when the strikes started getting too much. He now owns a couple of small shopping centres that he hires out to the tenants. He specialises in the smaller boutique ones, the upmarket centres.”

“And your mother? Does she work?”

“Yes, she qualified as a teacher, but she hasn’t taught in years, not since she got married. She’s an interior decorator. She has a store in Jo’burg. Mom decorated this house as well.”

“And you and Liza? Do you work part-time? Are you getting an allowance? How do you pay for day to day expenses?”

Nikki glared at the police officer. “Liza’s been tutoring at the university and she’s starting a new job next year. I’m too busy to work part-time, I have to complete coursework and practical work for my studies.” She cleared her throat. “I get an allowance each month from Dad.”

“That’s nice.” Carol September smiled, before becoming serious again. “What about your personal life? Do you drink? Smoke?”

Nikki swallowed. “Everyone drinks.”

“Yes, but do you?”

“Yes. We, my friends and I, go out every now and then. We drink. I smoke socially and during exam time. But I’m trying to quit.”

“Have you ever used or been offered drugs?”

“What? No. I mean, not serious stuff.” She rubbed her neck and squeezed her sunburnt shoulder by mistake. “There’s always a couple of people with weed around campus.”

Carol September nodded and made a note on the pad. Nikki decided not to say anything more and allow the officer to think what she wanted to.

The police officer stopped writing. She clicked the pen a few times. “During the last few months, have you noticed anything odd? For example, someone watching you, someone new in your life that pays just a bit too much attention to you or asked a lot of questions about your family, someone who wanted to borrow money? Anything that bothered you a little at the time, but which you just ignored?”

Nikki thought. “No.” She sat forward in her deck chair. “No.” She frowned. “I mean, I meet a lot of new people, new guys,” she gave a single shoulder shrug before continuing, “nobody has been asking questions or anything.”

“What about Liza? Did she say anything about unusual occurrences or people? Do you think she might have needed money for anything?”

“You think Liza organised her own abduction?” Nikki shook her head. “Wrong tack entirely. Liza’s the good girl.” A faint smile touched her lips, before she could stop it. “She doesn’t meet many people outside her social group. She’s very, um, aware that she has diabetes. She sometimes hides behind it as an excuse for not being more outgoing. She hangs out with her close friends, people she’s known forever. She hasn’t said anything about someone bothering her.”

“What about when you arrived here, in Hermanus. Have you noticed anyone watching the house? What about strange phone calls?”

“No, no.” Nikki paused. “I haven’t been paying much attention actually. I’ve been going out a lot. Liza was here mostly.” She thought about the last week. “Liza said that she was feeling a little claustrophobic here, but she didn’t want to come out with us, which is actually normal for her and she didn’t mention anything strange.”

Warrant Officer September wiggled forward on her seat. “Think. Really think. Did Elizabeth say anything else?”

“I don’t know.” Nikki pulled a hand through her hair. “I thought she was being difficult.”

The officer sat back. “If you remember anything, you must inform us immediately. Anything at all.”

Nikki rubbed her temple. The blood pounded there, the headache seeming to spread from the back of her skull throughout the rest of her head. “I know. I will.”

The door opened and both women turned in their chairs. Maritz stood with two cups of coffee in his hands. He placed it down on the table. “Both with two sugars and milk.” He cleared his throat. “How are your parents getting from the airport to here?”

“Dad said they would rent a car.”

“Also, your parents’ room is locked.” He left it as a statement, not a question.

“Um, yeah. Dad and Mom always lock their room when they’re away. It’s just in case somebody breaks in, a slight deterrent, you know. Liza and I haven’t been in there since we arrived. I don’t think there’s anything important in there.”

“We would still like to check.”

Nikki nodded. “Yeah, sure. Go ahead. The key is in the door.”

Maritz nodded pulled the door closed behind him.

“When did you arrive?” Carol September was ready with her questions again.

“A week ago today.” Nikki pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

September shook her head and tapped her pen against her notepad while she waited for Nikki to light up. “I thought you were trying to quit.”

“It seems like a good time to start again.”

September nodded. She sat back in her seat. “On the older pictures, Liza’s hair is blonde.”

Nikki blinked. “Yeah, so?”

“The plait that was left for us is a couple of shades darker than the pictures we have of her.”

“She dyed her hair.”

“When?”

“She’s been doing it for the last few months.”

Officer September clicked her pen twice. “Not to set you and her apart? To look different? You’re very close in age and looks.”

“Maybe she did. Why does that matter?”

Carol September shrugged. “Maybe it doesn’t. Maybe you encouraged her to. Maybe it was a way to make sure that the right girl was taken.”

“This is a load of bull.” Nikki’s voice was very quiet. She threw the cigarette stump to the ground and crushed it as she stood up. “I’m going inside.”

“Sit down.” September pushed herself out of the chair and moved to stand in front of the door. Nikki hesitated. “Sit down.” The officer spoke softly and slowly, but each sound was carefully enunciated. Beyond Carol September, Nikki could see the house being searched by more police officers and detectives. Even if she managed to get inside the house, there wasn’t anywhere she could hide. She sat down, keeping her arms crossed in front of her body, like a shield.

“Do you take drugs?”

Nikki blinked, surprised at the sudden return to a topic she’d thought they’d already finished. “No.”

“Would you agree to a drug test?”

Nikki pressed her lips together and dug her nails into her arms. “Instead of wasting your time here, maybe you should be out looking for my sister. I’ve told you everything that could have any relevance to Liza’s disappearance. The answer isn’t here with me, go find it somewhere else. Do your job, instead of wasting my time.” Her voice was low and venomous.

The female officer started to say something, but was interrupted by the door opening again. Maritz looked at each of them in turn. “Come with me.”

Nikki scraped the chair deliberately, keeping her arms crossed and her eyes on the detective. She heard Warrant Officer September’s chair also scraping back, but kept her eyes fixed ahead. He led her up the stairs and to her parents’ room. He stepped aside to allow her to enter first. Nikki stepped in, arms still crossed, nose and chin upright and strong, confident. These local police were just trying to find dirt in the house so that they didn’t have to go look through the

rest of the bloody town, never mind the outlying areas. She wasn't going to give them that. The kidnappers could be anywhere by now. She'd heard that Hermanus wasn't as neat and tidy as it looked at first glance. The town was apparently struggling with abalone poachers and drug dealers. What if this guy had taken Liza for a quick bit of cash? No, the police needed to stop interrogating her and focus on the bigger picture here.

She stopped, feeling her eyes growing wide. She let go of her arms and put her hands over her mouth. For a moment, she forgot to breathe. The room was trashed. Worse than the living room. The bedding was completely ripped apart. Feathers lay all over the bed and the floor. Pictures were smashed. The television mounted against the wall had long cracks running all along the screen. She turned slowly to view the whole room. And stopped. Above the beds, invisible from the doorway, there were marks on the wall. Nikki took a step closer and then pulled back in disgust. It was shit. On the pillows, right where her mother usually slept, the intruder had evacuated his bowls. Then, Nikki put her fist to her mouth to keep the nausea down, he'd smeared a bit of it on the wall.

She turned to the detective. "What does it mean?"

"It might just be random destruction. But then we have to ask why he chose this room." Maritz paused. "Has anything happened between your parents and any of their friends, employees, business partners?"

Nikki had to wait a moment before she could speak. She swallowed. "I, I don't think so. I don't know."

"Have you or your sister had any arguments with your parents?"

Nikki snorted and shook her head. "Detective, I don't talk to my parents enough to have any arguments with them. And Liza wouldn't. She's not like that." Nikki took a shuddering breath. "What does this mean? For Liza?" She looked at the detective. "Is he going to hurt her? Why haven't they phoned yet?" She felt the sick coming. She tried to swallow it back, then ran to the bathroom. She vomited, although she hadn't even known that there would be enough food in her stomach to throw up so much. She crouched there, her knees pressing into the floor, her one hand pulling her hair out of the way, and she felt broken. There was shame – she could almost feel the police staring through the open door. She felt the guilt that had kept her awake all night – what if she'd just listened to Liza for a change, what if she'd kept her promise to

actually spend some time with her this Christmas. And the fear, the least selfish emotion she'd felt in a long time. The fear for her sister.

Chapter 5: Telephone Calls

Her prison box showed only the faintest trace of the morning light. Through the small, high window, a few beams tried to traverse the gloom, but only succeeded in illuminating particles of dust floating through the room. Liza had stayed awake for most of the night, listening at the door, waiting for her kidnappers to go to sleep. Maybe she would be able to escape into the night. However, this had not happened. Throughout the night the television had been on, the kettle had boiled and footsteps had passed so close to the door that she had wondered if they were about to come into her box. Towards dawn, her already weary legs had grown stiff and the muscles cramped in the cold air. She was starting to feel sick as well. The different rushes of adrenaline had burnt through her. She'd become a self-taught diabetes expert since being diagnosed. She'd learnt that adrenaline ignited the fight or flight response. The cells within the body responded by making glucose available to be used for either action. In diabetics however, if the glucose was unused, the body couldn't reabsorb it. The glucose then bound with oxygen, since it didn't know where else to go. How stupid the human body could be. With the binding and breaking down, acetones were formed. Acetones. The same stuff that was in nail polish remover was running through her veins. She had to stay calm, she had to stop thinking about her body poisoning itself. She sat on the mattress and leant her back against the wall. There she had stayed. Now, in the chill morning light, she took stock.

One of them had brought some water in during the night, but she'd finished it sometime in the early hours. Now she needed to relieve herself. And she was thirsty again. She needed to eat soon as well. All her muscles hurt. Her temple still throbbed from where she had hit it against the stairs the previous day and she still picked out a little dried blood from her hair. Her fingers had explored the shorter hair. It felt weird. She felt weird. Her hands and fingers had splinters in them. Her throat was raw and she was incredibly thirsty. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry. She closed her eyes, resting her head against the wall, feeling the exhaustion and fear eating away at her stomach.

She'd felt fear before. She'd been scared of not finishing her thesis project, of not passing well, of not getting work, of disappointing people. She was a little scared of her car being stolen or a car accident when a taxi pulled out suddenly in front of her, and there was the vague fear of

not being happy one day. But this fear – this gnawing, panic-inducing fear of a real situation and real people – had she ever felt this type of fear?

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She was in her school uniform, eating oats and wondering if she should sneak some sugar, when a door slammed. She was still chewing when her father burst into the room.

“We’re leaving.”

She was about to complain that she still had to finish her breakfast, and that it was too early to leave, and she still had to brush her hair. But her father grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the house. She pulled away to pick up her school bag. She looked down the passage. Her mother was framed in the bedroom door. Her purple dressing gown tied as tightly as her arms were folded across her chest. The little girl waved, called goodbye and rushed out of the front door. It felt like a cold wind chased her from the house.

*

Liza’s eyes flew open, immediately awake. The door was being unlocked. Her feet slipped on the surface of the mattress as she tried to get up. She pressed her hands against the wall to push herself upright. The rough surface scratched her hands further and she only just managed to stand as the door opened.

“Morning, sweetheart. Slept well?”

She’d started thinking about the delivery man as the leader. He was physically imposing. He stood tall and spoke in a deep, neutral voice. No accent, and perfect diction. Whenever they were in the same room, he made sure to make eye contact with her. He wanted her to see him. A coldness spread through her. She’d watched enough movies to know what that meant. She shifted her eyes away from his and focused on the other man. The other man was timid. He hung back. She tried to remember if she’d ever looked into his eyes. Right now, his eyes were downcast, looking at her bare and bruised feet. His eyes flickered upward for a second, but not to look at her eyes, instead they fixed on her breasts. She pulled up her hands up to her chest, shielding herself from his voyeurism. They were both dressed in shorts and t-shirts. The leader came towards her, grabbing her by the arm. She yelped with fright. He dragged her along, the other man following behind. The procession lasted for only a few meters. They halted in front of a door.

“Five minutes.”

He shoved her forwards. Liza stumbled forwards into the bathroom, feeling the cool tiles on her feet, blinking into the bright sunlight. The door slammed shut behind her and the key turned. Liza was too grateful to care. She opened the tap full blast and gulped the water down. The water was brackish with a slight brown tinge, but it was cool and was a balm for her throat. She washed her face and relieved herself, before having a look around. The bathroom was small, dusty with more than a few cracks in the tiles. What really drew her attention was a small window set above the toilet. She looked towards the door, listening for a moment, before putting the toilet lid down, climbing up and examining the window. She carefully lifted the latch – the window opened. The window had no burglar bars in front of it and she had a clear view of gravel and dried grass, she leaned forward and craned her head, seeing the sunlight bouncing off the body of a car speeding past on the highway up on the hill. Where was she? The area didn't look like Hermanus. She took a deep breath of fresh air. She thought that she could smell the ocean. She had to be close. A sound in the passage made her jump. Her fingers slipped on the latch as she tried to fasten it. When the door opened, she was standing in the middle of the room.

“Good girl. Come here.” The man beckoned to her. Liza stepped forward. He took hold of her arm and led her back to the room where he deposited her roughly onto the mattress. “Right.” He reached into his pocket and Liza's throat tightened and muscles tensed. He pulled out a cell phone. “Now, time to work.” He tossed the phone from one hand to the other. “We know that your father is out of the country. So it's obviously in your best interests and ours to get him home as soon as possible, right? We know that your sister called the police. But now we need to make sure that she also calls your parents. Simple really.” He crouched down in front of her. “You call your sister, check when your parents are back here, and we end the call. And remember,” he held up a finger, like a parent cautioning a misbehaving child, “if you say anything we don't like, you go back in the box.”

Liza nodded. The man selected for a phone number, selected it and put the call on speaker. Liza wondered where he'd gotten Nikki's phone number. The dull ringing sounded through the speaker. He lay the phone on his palm, facing it toward Liza. Liza sat forward on the mattress, putting her mouth closer to the phone.

“Hello?”

It wasn't Nikki. For a moment, she wondered what number the man had called. But he slapped her arm and widened his eyes in silent command. Liza cleared her throat. "Hello. Can I talk to Nikki West?"

There was a long pause; Liza imagined that she could hear someone whispering on the far side of the line.

"This is Nikki."

"Hi." Liza almost sobbed. Nikki's voice sounded so close, also shaky and unsure, but she was there, just on the other side of the phone.

"Are you okay? Where are you?" The words were so fast, so breathy; they were almost indistinguishable over the speaker.

"I don't know." Again, he tapped her on the arm. "Nikki, I'm in trouble." Nikki was about to interrupt, but Liza spoke first. "You need to call Dad."

"They're on their way home. Liza, are you okay?"

Liza met the eyes of the man crouching in front of her. "Yes. I'm okay." The man's finger hovered over the end call button. "I love you." The connection disappeared. Liza allowed her head to fall forwards onto her chest. She was exhausted. She hoped that her final words had reached over the airwaves.

"Good girl." He patted her head, as though she was a dog. His hand drifted down the side of her face, touching her skin every now and then, causing small shocks to run through her whole body, to cup her chin. He forced her head upwards. "Now, if you're noisy or naughty, you're going to go right back into the box in the back of the van. Am I making myself clear?" Liza nodded. He roughly pushed her head backwards, away from him, a sudden expression of disgust colouring his features, as though he hated touching her, as though she was something to be squashed. Her head slammed into the wall. She cried out and tried to raise her hands to the back of her head, but found it impossible to reach with her hands still tied.

The two men were on their way out of the room.

"Hey! Wait! Please..." Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper. The driver was already out of the room, but the leader turned back.

"What?"

“I need food. I need to eat something.” He started to turn away, a smile decorating his face. “I need my medicine!” He turned to face her again, the smile gone. She lifted her arm, showing them the silver emergency bracelet. “I have to take medicine every day.” She swallowed. “I have diabetes mellitus.” She hated saying that, she’d never thought of herself as sick, but did not know how else to make them understand. “Please, I need food and lots of water.”

He turned away and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Liza called after him: “I’m going to die, dammit! Just listen to me!” The lock clicked. She hit the mattress with a flat hand and swore.

There were voices outside her door. Liza stopped moving and tilted her head slightly to hear what they were saying.

“Hey man, do you think she’s serious?” She thought this might be the driver.

“Hell, I don’t know. I think she’s just shitting us.”

“My mom is diabetic and she has to take medicine every day.”

“Your mom is old and fat. This girl’s too young.”

“Come on, Brent, maybe we should just get her some medicine.”

“How the hell do you want to do that? Are you a doctor that can just write out a script whenever you want? Dumbass.”

“Maybe we should call him?”

In the distance, a door opened and slammed shut. Liza listened for a few more seconds, but couldn’t hear anything else. She went back to the mattress and curled up.

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Memory mixed with nightmare. They were at her grandmother’s house. Her father kept yelling into the telephone. Granddad was also yelling into the telephone or at Dad. Grandma kept giving her sweets and chocolate milk, and crying behind closed doors. Liza missed her mom. She missed seeing her mom standing outside the school gate, she missed her mom’s special heart shaped eggs on toast, she missed the last little kiss goodnight. One afternoon she called home. She stood in the study, next to her grandfather’s desk with the clawed feet. Her granddad had told her that the desk had been a real monster once upon a time, until a good fairy had turned him into a desk. But one day, one day he’ll turn back! Since then she’d never come

into the office by herself, until now. She carefully turned the dial. She pressed the receiver tightly to her ear, holding it with both hands. Her mom answered.

“Hi, Mommy.”

“Liza. Where are you? Is your dad making you call?”

“No. I miss you.”

“Well, you tell your dad that he had no right to keep you from me.” Liza held the phone away from her ear as her mom’s voice was rising. “He is being a royal ass. You tell him that. Tell me where you are. I’m coming to fetch you now.”

“Mommy, Dad said not to –”

“I don’t give a shit what he said. Answer me.”

Liza started crying. “You’re scaring me, Mommy.” The study door opened.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing?” Her grandma lifted the receiver out of her hands. She listened for a second. “How can you possibly speak to your daughter like that? Don’t call here again.” She put the receiver down.

“Grandma, what about Nikki?”

Her grandmother knelt and held Liza in her arms. “Sweetheart. Sweetheart. Everything will be okay.”

*

His phone vibrated against his leg. He’d decided to keep it on silent for now. He slipped it out beneath the table and checked the caller ID. Unknown. Shit. He’d just got off the line to those other two morons. What now? Could nobody just fucking think for themselves? He finished his beer in one long pull. He got up, his chair scraping along the floor and nodded his head towards the bathroom.

He checked the other stalls, making sure they were all empty. The phone was still vibrating as he locked himself into the stall furthest from the bathroom door.

“What?”

“Answer when I call.”

“Listen, I’m not your little lapdog. So get over yourself and tell me what you want.”

“You bastard. You took the wrong girl. I thought we’d agreed you’d take Nikki.”

“We had to change plans. Liza was the easier target. Nikki’s always around people.”

“Damnit, she’s diabetic.”

“So I’ve heard.” He kicked lazily at the toilet base, just hard enough to make a sound.

“What?”

“The guys called me. She told them. They’re going to take great care of her.”

“They’d better.” There was a pause. “Is she okay?”

“What do you think?”

“Maybe I should bring you some insulin.”

“Hell no. Neither of us can have our fingerprints on this. Relax, my guys can take care of this.”

“Where did you get them? How do they know what to do?”

“Does it matter?”

“Just tell me.”

“I used to date the one guy’s sister. He introduced me to a friend of his. They used to work together, but were both retrenched last year. They’re angry at the world, desperate for money and will do everything I say. They make fine kidnappers.”

“How the hell will they be able to take care of a diabetic?”

“Let me worry about that. Untwist your panties and don’t call me unless it’s an emergency.”

He pressed the end call button. He gave the toilet an extra hard kick, feeling the force of it running up his leg, vibrating through his bones. He unlocked the door, washed his hands and smiled as he stepped back into the busy restaurant. He stopped at the bar and waved to the barman. “Two more!” He knocked on the bar twice to emphasize his order, before heading back to his table.

*

Liza's eyes were wide open. The door handle turned. It was the driver. He'd called the other man Brent, but Liza still didn't know his name. He was still twitchy – his eyes flickered from her face to the ground to the plate of food in his hands and back to her face again.

“Here.”

He put the food down on the floor. He turned and took hold of the handle.

“Hey, wait!”

He looked over his shoulder.

“What are you going to do with me? What do you want?”

The man didn't meet her eyes. He turned away again. The door locked behind him. Liza scrambled, not even getting up completely, sliding on her sore knees to reach the bottle of water. She struggled with the cap and her tied hands, but almost laughed with joy when she opened it and took grateful, cool gulps. After the fourth swallow, she lowered the bottle, wondering if they would try to drug her food and drink. She carefully opened the two sandwiches, checking underneath the cheese. Bread, cheese, peanut butter. She did a quick calculation – six units of insulin. That's how much she'd usually inject with this meal. Probably more, since she hadn't taken any insulin since the previous afternoon. The smell of the peanut butter made her tongue water. A routine could become a religion. The routine reinforced by years of habit and need, broken so quickly. She'd been used to testing every morning when she woke up, before every meal. She planned her meals, her snacks, her life around her insulin. Her body was dependant on two drugs: Insulin and routine. Without them, she wasn't going to survive much longer. Her stomach growled. Another sign. She counted them in her head. Intense thirst, frequent urination and extreme hunger. She shook her head and bit into the bread. How long would she still be able to hold on?

Chapter 6: Pain

Liza woke, she must have slept then. The sun had shifted. Her head was throbbing, her throat still dry and her bladder aching for release. She looked for her water bottle. The water was warm, but she drank everything. She squeezed the bottle, hearing the plastic crack, as she tried to get more water out. She took deep breaths. She shouldn't have drunk all of that. Her kidneys were sore and she didn't know how long before they'd allow her to use the toilet again. She used her hands to push herself up. She put her ear next to the door and listened.

There were voices again. She lowered her head and put her ear next to the keyhole. She could smell cigarette smoke. The voices. She could pick out the man called Brent, his voice was the loudest and frequently punctuated by swear words. There was another voice, which was too soft to allow her to distinguish the words, but which she recognised as scrawny man with the acne scars. Then there was a voice she hadn't heard before. She closed her eyes. Listening. Brent responded to a question with an annoyed "Yeah, yeah." She hadn't heard the question, but she heard the tone of voice. Then there were footsteps. Liza quickly moved back from the door, moving to stand with her back against the wall.

"Hey girl." Brent smiled at her, he was tossing a bottle of water from one hand to the next. "You're awake." He stepped into the room, resting his back against the wall next to the door. "Don't worry. Just came to check on you." He smiled, showing the perfect teeth she associated with childhood braces. "Here." He tossed the water bottle to her.

She tried to catch, but her hands were still uncoordinated and unused to being anchored together. She missed and the bottle landed on the mattress in front of her. She kept her eyes on Brent. Waiting for him to leave. He stretched and yawned.

Liza pretended to be as relaxed as he was. She reached for the bottle, opened it and drank. The liquid was also tepid. She moved her stiff muscles, trying to find another more comfortable position.

Brent sighed. "So Liza," he leant back against the doorframe, "holiday not going quite as well as you wanted it to, hey?"

She didn't answer.

“You know what I want for Christmas?” His tone was light, almost flirty. “A big pile of cash.” He winked at her. “Do you think Mommy and Daddy will give it to me? Or do you think I should send them something to encourage them?”

Liza choked and coughed. Through her watering eyes, she looked up to see Brent smiling.

“What do you think?”

She cleared her throat and swallowed. “They’ll pay.”

“You think so? I think they’ll be even happier to do so if we give them some incentive.”

Liza got up from the mattress. She kept her back against the wall, pressing it against the bricks.

“Hey, hey, don’t run away.” He took a step towards her, holding out his hands as though he was trying to calm a skittish horse. “We’re just talking, you and me.” He looked over his shoulder, the other man came into the room as well. “And Johnnie’s here as well now.”

“Flippen hell, man! No names!”

“Liza doesn’t mind, do you?” He turned to Liza. “I mean, how fair is it that we know your name, but you don’t know ours?”

They were moving towards her. Cornering her. Johnnie leapt forward, slamming her whole body against the wall. His hands moving freely across her chest and stomach, one coming to rest on her hip and the other holding onto her upper arm and pinning her to the wall. Liza screamed. She tried to hit them. Brent grabbed her wrist, twisting it away. She pulled and tugged and felt something snap – her metal Medic-Alert bracelet clanged as it fell to the ground. A hand closed over her mouth and she could smell Brent’s breath, she could smell beer, chips, and a sourness that she suddenly knew that she would forever associate with hatred, she heard the hatred echoed in his voice as he whispered in her ear: “You can scream and scream, but nobody will hear you.” He raised his voice. “Hold out her arms.”

Liza tried to scream. She bit.

Brent yelped and pulled his hand away. “Bitch!” He stepped away and spoke to Johnnie. “Hold her.” He left her field of vision.

Liza struggled even harder. With just one attacker holding her, she thought that she might have a chance. She kicked out with her legs, aiming for his groin. She tried to elbow him in the chest. She tried to bite, hit, kick, and scream. Another pair of hands grabbed her. Brent came to stand

in front of her again. Brent shoved a piece of cloth into her mouth, pulling her head forward to tie it around the back. Liza screamed into the gag. Johnnie pushed her against the wall, turning her body sideways, pressing her hip into the wall and using his body to hold her. Brent pulled her arms, still tied together, and held them against the wall. Liza formed her hands into fists. She held them so tight, she could feel the skin spreading taut over her knuckles.

“Spread your fingers! Come on!” He slammed her hands into the wall. Still, she kept her fists balled, she kept trying to wiggle free, she kept trying to scream. Brent swore again. For a second he released her hands. Before she could react, though, he seized a handful of her shorn hair and slammed her head into the wall.

A darkness hit her like a wave. Her vision blurred. Her body went limp. She felt liquid heat crawling down her legs. Something else was happening, something pulling her forward, she was a falling stone being dragged down by gravity. She felt blinding pain and fainted.

*

They hadn’t bothered to tie her hands again. Instead, they had wrapped a bandage around the injured hand and left her. She woke just as they locked the door. The bandage was already soaked through with her blood. She lay in a pool of urine. She heard the voices again. This time they were closer, just outside her door.

“You got it?” Liza felt as though she was going to faint again, but she took a deep breath and listened to unknown voice.

“Here.”

“Dumbass. You touched it.”

“Difficult to get it any other way.” The man called Brent sounded annoyed. There was a pause.

“Are you going to take it or not?”

“Hang on, let me get something to hold it with. I don’t want my fingerprints all over it. There. I need to use your car.”

“What? Why?”

“Come on, man, think a bit. The police have seen my car.”

The voices moved away. Liza tried to sit up, to move away from the ammoniac smell which seemed to be right beneath her nose. She'd sat up too quickly, the blood rushed to her head and then blackness descended.

Chapter 7: Homecoming

The police had decided to wait for her parents to arrive. Nikki knew that the phone call had somewhat convinced them that she wasn't involved. Nevertheless, Carol September had insisted that she give sample of urine for drug testing. It didn't matter. The results would probably be negative. The last time she'd smoked weed was just after starting university. After a few puffs, she'd decided that alcohol was a much better drug: legal, fun, and she could get other people to buy it for her.

Now, they all sat in the dining room, feeling the evening air cool the room. The police had decided to leave all the destruction in place. Nikki suspected that they wanted to see a first reaction, that way they could gauge if either of her parents were involved. She'd however insisted that they open some of the windows, the smell was getting to her. She shivered. She remembered Liza's terrified voice. Nikki had never heard her sister sound so scared. She started imagining what they could be doing to Liza, but then stopped. She didn't want to know. She shivered again.

"Are you cold?" Maritz met her eyes. Nikki nodded. Maritz asked September to fetch a jersey. Nikki knew that she should be grateful for their care, but a suspicion had emerged, both from her side and from theirs.

The jersey was the scratchy one she usually avoided. Nikki draped it over her shoulders and thanked the officer. Nikki kept her face impassive. She was exhausted. She wondered what would happen if she fell asleep here on the dining room table? Would they consider it a confession or a further sign of innocence?

Just as that thought passed through her mind, she saw car lights stop in front of the gate. Without a word, she pushed her chair back and walked to the window. All the police officers joined her. They watched the black Mercedes pull in, park behind the police car and heard the engine cut out. Everyone moved to the front door with her. A car door slammed outside. The officers stepped back to allow Nikki to open the door. She was just in time to see her father rushing up the steps.

"Nicola! Are you okay?" Her father reached out and pulled her into a hug.

“Dad.” Nikki pressed her face against his chest, feeling the weight shift from her shoulders to his. “Dad.”

He let her go and stepped into the house, shaking hands with Maritz. “What’s being done to find her?” Her father was already walking towards the dining room, dropping keys and cell phone onto the table in the front entrance. Maritz followed her father, but September waited by the door. Waited with Nikki as her mom took slow, measured, steps, coming to stand in front of her daughter.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Nikki.” Her mom held out her arms and gave her daughter a quick hug. “What happened?”

September cleared her throat. “Mrs West, I think that the Detective will be briefing you inside the house.”

Nikki didn’t meet her mother’s eyes. One moment they were still standing in the cooling air, the next her mother swept past her into the house. When Nikki turned around, September was still there.

“What?” Nikki couldn’t keep the edge out of her voice. It bit into the night air, and she wondered if it had been loud enough to have followed her mother’s shadow into the living room. September’s expression was strange. Like she was asking a question without words, or offering sympathy without a hug. Nikki pulled a face, trying to soften her sharpness. “I know. It’s just the way she is.”

“Always?”

Nikki shrugged. “Does it matter?”

September didn’t answer. She stepped aside to allow Nikki into the house, and locked the door behind her.

*

“Nikki, you should really think about this dance thing. Maybe talk to your sister about it.”

Nikki turned her face from the car window, looking at the back of her mother’s head. Her mother was driving, Liza squirmed in the front seat, moving so that her body was almost

completely turned to the passenger side window, as though she didn't want to be part of this conversation.

“Why?”

“Your school work is suffering with all these extra-curricular activities. Drama club, dance lessons, guitar lessons, tennis. Maybe you should cut down a little. Spend more time on your academic subjects. Liza can give you advice.”

Nikki looked down at her outfit. She was wearing a black ballet leotard beneath a zip-up jersey and skirt. Her ballet stockings suddenly felt very stiff against her legs. Her hair drawn up into a bun and the heavy gel designed to keep the hairs in place was too hard, too tightly drawn.

“Mom, my solo contemporary piece did well, you heard the examiners. They awarded the group piece honours.” She been preparing for the dance eisteddfod for months. Her muscles were getting stiff after all her activity of the day.

“You’re going to grade nine next year. If you don’t start focussing now, then you won’t achieve anything.” Her mother’s brown eyes were visible in the rear-view mirror. “Choose one activity, focus on it. That’s the only way to achieve excellence. Liza knows that.”

Nikki swallowed. Her hand reached for the certificates she’d just received. Yes, she wasn’t the best in her class, but she always did well. Why couldn’t her achievements mean something? The sub-text of her life: be more like your sister. Copy your sister.

Her mother looked back to the road. “That way you’ll have time for extra classes and studying. Maybe we should stop your dance classes? You don’t really want to be a dancer one day, right?”

“I love contemporary dance.”

“Well, that’s up to you then. But it’s not a future, not a career. Surely you can see that?” They stopped at a traffic light. The lights changed. “Liza, baby, I was just thinking, we should really start planning your twenty-first now. Is there a theme you’d like? Do you want a dance party? Dinner at a restaurant? We must really start thinking about this early. You love movies, right? We could do a classic movie theme and everyone will have to dress up like film stars from the 1940s. What do you think, baby?”

“I don’t want a party.”

“Don’t be a bore. Of course you want a party. You’re only young once.” Her eyes fretted back to her younger daughter in the rear view mirror. “Nikki, don’t lean your head back like that, I don’t want all that hair gel on the seats. And don’t put that stuff in the wash basket. It makes everything smell of sweat.”

Liza half turned in her seat, turning her neck so that she could look toward the back seat. Nikki wanted to pull a face, roll her eyes, smile at her sister. She could see Liza wanted to do the same, and that Liza needed her to initiate the gestures. Liza needed a sign that her sister didn’t blame her. Nikki couldn’t. She didn’t have anything left to give after a day of nerves, adrenaline, stress, triumph and now this. Her mother had said she was proud of her at the concert hall in front of the other parents, but the moment they were alone she would make other suggestions. Liza turned to face her window again. Nikki also looked out the window. She rested her head against the glass, closed her eyes and bit her lip. She wasn’t going to cry.

*

Nikki and officer September followed the voices into the living room. The police were showing her parents the wreckage. She heard a piece of glass crack beneath somebody’s shoe and was just in time to move with the group into the dining room on the other side of the entrance hall. Her father held out his hand for hers. She and her mother sat on either side of him. The police formed a line on the opposite side.

“What can you tell us?” Her dad, his English accent pronounced in times of stress, sounded worried. The words were clearly spoken, but there was a slight tremor, which made her squeeze his hand. He squeezed back.

“Mr and Mrs West, we were called to the house by your daughter, Nikki. She and a friend had returned yesterday afternoon to find the house in the state you just saw, and they were unable to locate Liza. But they did find this.” He pushed the bunch of hair and the note across the table. Both were now in little plastic bags. Nikki’s parents put their heads closer together to read the note.

Her father swore. He let go of Nikki’s hand to pull off his glasses and rub a shaky hand across his eyes. Her father shook his head. “This is just insane. Do you have any ideas where she might be?” On the last word, his voice rose, the tenor changing.

“Sir, we are still investigating. Some of your neighbours saw a Speedy Post delivery van outside the front gate. When we contacted their offices, they couldn’t find any record of

deliveries intended for your home. We suspect that the delivery van was used as a trick to get her to open the door. Whoever took her probably used the van to transport her as well. We're still trying to track the van." Maritz took out his notebook and checked something. "We're following up on a report of a similar van being stolen a few months ago. If it is the same van, then this plan has been in motion for quite a bit of time." He gave the family a significant look before continuing. "The van was stolen in October. Do you remember any strange calls or things that were unusual during that month?"

Her father shook his head.

Mrs West cleared her throat. "The magazine article. Our magazine article was published in October, but nothing else strange."

"Magazine article?"

"This house was featured in Real Houses SA. Nothing else happened."

"I'd like a copy of that article." He nodded to himself. "During the call this morning, Liza said that she was okay. Liza did all of the talking. She asked Nikki to call you and said that she was in trouble. We were hoping that she might have given us a clue, but -" he shrugged. "Maybe she wasn't able to."

"What now?"

"We wait for them to call. We continue investigating."

"You are aware that my daughter is diabetic? Type one diabetes. If we don't find her in a day or two, it might be too late. Just tell me what you need. If you need additional finances or special equipment brought in, money is of no concern. Should we get outside help? Investigators from Cape Town or Johannesburg? Someone private?"

Nikki noticed that September's eyes were lingering on her. She shifted in her seat and refocused her eyes on Maritz.

"The most important thing is to find out what he wants. The note mentions money. That might be one possibility. We also need to consider other reasons."

"What do you mean?" Nikki's mother asked coldly, she sat up a little straighter.

Maritz stood up, turned away from them, walking to the entrance to the living room and back again. "This is an unusual case. At this stage, we're looking at everything." He walked back

and sat down again. “That in there, that’s not robbery or planned. That’s destruction. That’s why we also have to consider revenge, somebody who is angry at either of you. Are there any ex-employees or business partners that you think might be capable of something like this?”

Her father put his glasses back on and frowned at the policeman. “I’ve had some disagreements with business associates. We’re involved in a drawn out legal battle. My one partner lied about certain things, I’ve had to take him to court to get the money out that I’m owed. It’s been unpleasant, but I don’t think that he would do something this drastic.”

“We’ll need his name and contact details.”

Yes, of course. Marco Gonzales. The number is on my cell phone.” He shook his head. “But Marco, he’s tough, but I don’t think he’ll hurt my family. And with the recession, we’ve had to downsize. Do you really think a previous employee would go to such lengths?” With the last words, he looked over at his wife.

She shook her head in response. “Why would you think that there would be another reason? Isn’t money enough?”

Detective Maritz closed his notebook and dropped it into his pocket. “Please follow me. There is something more you should see.”

Nikki was about to get up as well, when September held up a hand to stop her. Nikki listened to the footsteps going up the stairs, her father’s firm step, her mother’s high heels. There was a pause. Even from where she was sitting, she could hear the sudden cry.

*

It was close to midnight or just past. Her mother was walking up and down, along the length of the dining room table. Her father’s glasses had been removed and replaced again and again. He was sitting on an easy chair, his elbows resting on his knees. The police kept asking the same question. Finally, Mr West covered his eyes with his hands. His frown lines had deepened since Nikki had seen him last. He was wearing casual clothes, Levi jeans and a Pringle button up shirt. Nikki had so many memories of her father in suits, ties and collared shirts, that she struggled for a moment to find those images in her mind of weekends spent relaxing at home, those times where she’d seen her father in anything besides his office apparel.

Maggie West held a glass with a tot of amber liquid poured over ice cubes. She paused in her travels and the ice clinked in the glass. “What if this is just a trick? Something to make you,”

this was directed at Maritz who had dark circles beneath his eyes and a grey pallor to his skin, “look in the wrong place.” She rested her weight on one of the chairs. “This is unacceptable. Nikki,” she turned to her daughter, “did they say when they would call again?”

“I told them that you’d be here tonight.”

“Why haven’t they called then?”

“Mom.” Nikki closed her eyes for a second. “They’ll call.”

“Didn’t they give you a number that we should call?”

“I told you, no.” Nikki turned in her seat so that she could see her mother. Maggie West was very beautiful. She was ten years younger than her husband. Her blonde hair, perfectly highlighted, curled easily onto her shoulders and contrasted nicely with dark brown eyes that rarely blinked, narrowed, or laughed. That would have caused wrinkles, Nikki thought viciously. Her svelte figure was wrapped in blue tights and a long jersey-knit t-shirt. The black and silver heels had been thrown into a corner of the dining room an hour before, and her blue toe nails glittered in the electric lights. The one foot tapped on the carpet.

“When I spoke to Liza last, she said that you two were arguing.”

“What? No. Not really.”

“You hate this house.”

“Yes, that’s true, but Liza wanted to come. She wanted to spend time working on her writing.”

“Writing?” Her father asked. “What writing?”

“She didn’t mention it, because you wanted her to focus on her studies. She’s working on a novel.”

“What’s it about?” Her mother asked.

Nikki shrugged. “She didn’t want to tell me. She said that it would disrupt her writing experience. She wanted it to be a surprise when I read it. All she said was that it was about us growing up in the outskirts of London. She said that it would be about all the South Africans who moved there to get away from apartheid and what their lives were like. She said that fictionalised non-fiction was hot right now. She’d been doing research and she was so excited, Dad. She wanted to show you that there was a career for her as a writer.”

Her father looked at his wife. Maggie West drained her glass and looked away. The glass was deposited onto a corner of the table. She crossed her arms across her chest. Nikki frowned. It felt as though her throat was clogged and her lungs full of water. She could feel there was something not said. Some secret between her parents. She thought back, trying to quickly scan through her very early memories, but her father spoke again and interrupted musings.

“Where’s her computer?”

“In the living room. Whoever took Liza smashed it to bits.” Nikki shook her head. “I don’t think it can be repaired. Completely smashed. Liza’s going to be heartbroken.”

Maggie turned to her husband. “It can’t be. She was too young to remember things from then.”

Her father didn’t reply.

Maritz cleared his throat. “Mr and Mrs West, is there something we should know about? Something from the past?”

Nikki’s father stood up. He removed his glasses and his voice was suddenly hard. Nikki could see the man used to business meetings, the man who was used to dealing with problems. “Detective Maritz, our private family matters are irrelevant to this case. Find my daughter.”

Maritz had been sitting at the dining room table. He now stood. “Sir, if we do not have all possible information...”

“All the information you need to know is that my daughter is gone. We want her back.” He turned to look at his wife and back again to the police officer. “My office will send copies of employment records of any employees recently retrenched and a summary of the court case we’ve been involved in. Are we done, Detective?”

“It’s a start.” Maritz nodded. He looked at his watch. “I understand that you must both be tired after the long flight. We’ll return tomorrow morning. There are a few things we would like to discuss more fully. And we need a signed statement.”

Maritz nodded toward September and both of them started collecting papers, getting ready to leave. Nikki, watching them, felt the tightness in her chest grow harder. The drowning sensation increased, cold Atlantic water rushing into her lungs, freezing her from the inside.

“We’ll sleep in Liza’s room, darling.” Her father spoke gently as he took her mother’s hand.

The police nodded in agreement, Maritz adding that they could get someone in to clean the room the next day.

Nikki sat up. “What the hell? Everyone’s just going to bed now? Liza’s in danger and you’re just leaving?”

“Nikki.” Warrant Officer September stood in front of her. “We all need rest. We have other officers at the station working on this case. We’ll find Liza.”

Maritz cleared his throat. “Nikki, will you let us out?”

Nikki wanted to tell them to do it themselves. They knew where the door was, right? But she glanced at her parents and then got to her feet. Her legs trembled as she walked along the marbled entrance hall. She was tired. And hungry. She wouldn’t have believed that it was possible to have such banal human needs in a situation like this. Her stomach and muscles should know that she was going through a crisis. She led the police officers to the front door.

They’d started leaving the gate remotes on the table in the entrance hall – with so many people moving in and out, it was the only way to make sure that they didn’t lose the little plastic controls. She grabbed one and unlocked the door.

Maritz and September walked out onto the first step and stopped. Nikki was standing outside the door as well, her hand lifted with the remote ready. But she lowered it when both the officers turned to face her.

Maritz cleared his throat. “What did your mother mean when she said that you and Liza had been arguing?”

Nikki blushed. “That’s personal.”

“Was it a fight about boys? Money?” September asked.

“No, nothing like that.” Nikki glanced into the front door, checking the entrance hall. She pulled the door until it was only slightly ajar. “Listen, we had a fight. She called me a hypocrite, because I don’t talk to my parents, but I still take their money for studies, food, rent, so on.” She gave a half grin. “Sort of what you were saying earlier. I told her that she was an enabler, since she refused to call our parents on their lies and selfishness. It was bad. We didn’t talk again for a while.”

“Why are both of you here at your parents’ holiday house then?”

“She wanted to make peace.” Nikki smiled. “Liza hated leaving arguments simmering. She hated leaving bad blood standing stagnant. That’s what she said.” She looked down, the smile disappearing. “I wasn’t proud of the argument. I was nasty, bitchy, to her. I just didn’t want to talk about it. I knew she would be alone during December and I felt a little guilty. I wanted her to come to Cape Town, she suggested coming here.”

“Are your parents angry about the argument?” September’s voice was low.

“Humpf.” Nikki snorted. “Fuck that. No, my mom’s just difficult. Liza’s perfect. She gets good marks, works hard, does her chores. Parents’ favourite. Teacher’s pet. I was the screw up. Liza stuck to one thing and became excellent at it, I was into a new hobby every month. Not to bore you with poor little rich girl’s sob story of the week, but it was...” she searched for the word, “hard growing up with such a role model to follow. My mom would tell me to do this like Liza, to wear my hair like Liza, to follow her example. Eventually I got tired of trying to be someone else.” She shrugged. “Sorry, this is all ancient history. My mom’s a bitch.” She wagged her head from side to side, weighing what she was going to say next. “But so am I. Maybe we’re too alike. Liza often said that. She said that Mom and I speak the same language, but we both speak it so loudly that we don’t bother to listen to each other.” Nikki paused. She had said too much. The sudden purge made her crave a cigarette. She rubbed her fingers against each other, trying to get rid of the itch. She’d been raiding her mother’s stash, but she didn’t want to smoke in front of her parents. Strange how family psychology works. Desperate to rebel, desperate to please.

Maritz nodded. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.” He nodded at September and they started walking down the steps.

“Hey.” Nikki called. “Do you think they’ll let her go if my parents pay?”

The two officers looked at each other. “Every case is different. We hope to find her before they have to make a choice about that.” Maritz’s voice was very quiet.

Nikki pressed the remote to open the gate and the officers walked to their car. The car pulled away. Nikki stood outside the front door, her back resting against the wood, and she wished that the detectives could have stayed.

She felt as though she was swimming through a rip current. She’d gotten caught in one as a child. She kept paddling and kicking, but the force was too strong. Eventually she had been running out of breath, out of strength and she started to wonder what would happen if she just

stopped. With her arms and legs starting to cramp, she'd given in a little and started to move with the current. That was when she realised that it was possible to swim with the current, but paddle sideways, slowly moving towards the shore.

She was again being pulled along by a cold current; soon it might start pulling her under. She wasn't sure which way to paddle, she could not see the shore or feel the ground beneath her feet.

Chapter 8: Blurry Vision

She opened her eyes. Sunlight was coming in through the window above her. The blood had seeped into the cloth and through it during the night. She lifted her arm and looked at the brown-red blot defacing the blue and white mattress cover. She was going to be sick – quickly she turned her head from the stain, closed her eyes and took deep breaths that came out jagged with pain. Her finger was still throbbing like crazy, even though she knew it wasn't there. She'd read about phantom limbs and pain somewhere. After an amputation, patients often felt pain or sensation in the limb or part of limb that had been removed. Amputation. Torture.

She sat up gradually this time, keeping her eyes closed. She tucked her injured arm close to her body, not caring about the damp bloody bandage pressing against her blouse. She didn't want to look at it. At first, the blood pounded in her ears. She felt dizzy. The sensation passed. She was sitting upright, her back supported by the wall and her head tilted backwards. For a moment, she delighted in the cool wall, the roughness of it, the solid barrier between herself and any who could harm or help.

Another bright morning. Day three. She opened her eyes.

No. No, no, no. Her vision was blurry. Distorted. She blinked a few times, hoping her vision would clear. Oh no. This had never happened to her before, but she remembered reading about it. A diabetic sufferer is unable to break down glucose. So what happens to it? It lodges in the blood and urine, causing a type of toxicity. If a diabetic goes without insulin for too long, then even the eyes were affected by the excess glucose. The eyeball only had to swell a fraction of a millimetre for vision to distort. Liza felt like crying.

No, she knew what she was going to do. What she had to do. They weren't going to let her go. She had seen their faces. More than being able to describe how each of the men looked, she knew them, knew their emotions and moods, knew them. They were not planning on keeping her around for long. The brutality they had shown the previous evening had made their intentions clear. They were going to kill her. She got up. She swayed, but gritted her teeth and allowed her body to adjust to being vertical. She walked to the door and slammed her right palm against wooden panels.

“Hey! Hey!” She hit the door again, and then kicked it with her foot. “I need the bathroom!”

She heard a door open and slam shut. A string of expletives were punctuated by footsteps coming towards her. She took a step back just in time, as the door slammed open. Johnnie’s hair was tousled, as though he’d been asleep. He was wearing shorts, but no shirt. He was skinny, but with a slight beer belly starting to form. His skin was pale, as though he hardly took his shirt off. Johnnie was a follower, not a leader. He stood hunched forwards, his teeth bared in irritation. She was relieved that he had opened the door and not Brent.

“What?” Johnnie through his teeth.

Liza had to swallow before she could speak. “I need the bathroom.”

His eyes flickered over her, pausing as he looked at her eyes. His eyes rested for a second on the bandaged hand, before moving to a spot above her head.

“Right.” He stood aside.

At the bathroom door, she paused. “I need to clean myself. I need some time. You can lock the door and I’ll knock when I’m done.”

He rubbed his one eye with the heel of his hand. “Yeah, yeah. Just get moving.”

She waited until she heard the bathroom door lock behind her. She relieved herself, washed her face, drank the brownish tap water. Liza didn’t turn off the tap. The water poured from the mouth of the tap, swirled around the ceramic basin and rushed down the drain. Was there pictures in the motion of the water? For a moment, she thought her finger had come loose and was washing down the drain. She snatched at it. Water trickled through her fingers. She looked into the mirror flecked with soap and dried toothpaste, dusty, with a mocking picture of a duckling in the corner. She herself looked even worse than the mirror. Even with her blurry vision, she could still see how grubby she looked. Her short hair was uneven from the amateur cut, oily from too many days without a wash. She could smell the dried sweat on her clothes and skin, sweat from fear, sweat from heat, sweat from pain. There were rusty brown patches and drops on her red shirt. Other stains from sweat and dirt were also visible. She couldn’t see her pants in the small mirror, but she could feel the stickiness of the previous night’s accident still on her legs. There was a damp white towel hanging next to the sink. She stuck the towel beneath the running water and wiped off the dried urine from her legs and pants as best she could. Her body felt like a foreign object. She couldn’t remember a time when she had been

this grimy. She couldn't remember being this uncomfortable inside her own skin. She took a deep breath and unrolled the bandage. The last layer stuck to the dried blood around the wound and she yelped with the pain. She dropped the bandage into the sink.

Pulling the bandage off had caused the wound to bleed again. They had cut her finger off at the knuckle. It looked weird. She felt as though she was looking at someone else's hand. The flesh was swollen and red with trauma and dried blood. She took the towel and wet one slightly cleaner edge. She tried to dab off some of the dried blood, but every time she touched the injury, flames of pain shot through her entire hand and arm. She considered putting her hand under the flowing brownish water, but the thought made her feel cold. What if the rest of her finger really did wash away? She opened the bathroom cupboard, hoping for some sort of disinfectant or clean bandages, but only found extra soap and miniature bottles of shampoo and conditioner. Brakish water would have to do. She pulled her bandage out of the sink and rinsed it as well as she could, all the while hoping that the brownish water would become clearer. She unrolled some toilet paper and wrapped it carefully wrapped it around the stump, before adding the bandage over the top. She knew that she had to wrap it around tighter, but when she tried, her eyes started to water and her whole body contracted with the pain. She slashed water on her face, wanting to wash the pain from her memory as well.

She turned away from the running tap and climbed onto the toilet lid again. She stood on her tiptoes and examined the window. She flinched as her sore hand touched the wooden frame, but she needed both hands for this task. She pressed upward. The window stuck a little bit in places, but it slipped up when she applied more force.

She placed one knee onto the cold porcelain top of the cistern. Then her next leg. She worried that the top might crack, break. She placed her hands on the open window and pulled herself upright. She bumped her left hand against the wall as she tried to support her weight and had to stifle a cry. She managed to get her one leg through the window. She struggled to find footing on the outside windowsill. Her foot slipped and the window frame bruised the inside of her thigh. She finally managed to place her foot on the dusty windowsill. She had to scrunch up her body to get her shoulders and chest through the window. She carefully shifted her weight over from the leg still inside the house, to the leg already outside. Her chest rested on the sharp window frame, the edge digging into her sternum and along the length of her ribs. She lifted her other leg and managed to get it through the window as well. She stood with both feet on the windowsill and looked down. The ground was closer than she'd expected. She dropped to

the ground and lost her footing, falling sideways and cursing as a jolt of pain shot from her feet to where her finger should have been. She slowly got to her feet. The house was old, surrounded by bluegum trees. She crept around until she could see the van they had brought her in. There – it was parked on a stretch of gravel, with a road leading away from the house and disappearing between the trees. The house was in a valley, above her, she could see a proper tar road. The road twisted and turned, following the contours of the valley. A car appeared around a corner, the sun reflecting off the white paint, and sped away, disappearing around the next bend. The road was far from her, high up against the hillside. She just had to reach it, no matter how far it was. She remembered the lights she had seen when they had taken her into the house. She frowned, but couldn't see anything clearly. Shapes seemed to rise from the fynbos and then get swallowed into the ground again. Were they really there or just illusions? She had to get to the road. Cars were guaranteed to have real people driving them. People who could help her.

Liza listened for a second more, hoping that Johnnie would ignore the running water for a few minutes more. She ran in a semi-crouched position, reaching the van without challenge. She closed her eyes, praying for the first time in years, and ran. The stones were unkind to feet softened by years of sitting behind desks and scrubbed free of dead skin. Her feet slipped on the loose stones once or twice, but she continued onwards. She was running along the gravel road, trying to keep her balance, trying to go faster.

She looked back over her shoulder, her warped vision making it difficult to distinguish between shapes. She was just about to turn the first corner into the bluegum forest. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. Brent was standing outside – his hand had paused on its way to his mouth in an attitude Liza recognised from years of watching her mother smoke, the other hand was holding a cup. Her feet skid on the loose stones as she came to a stop, her heart beating as though it was about to pop through her ribs. She saw liquid flying through the air as Brent threw his cup and cigarette away. He turned his head to the house.

“Johnnie! She’s getting away!”

He started running. Liza let out a panicked cry and ran. She was running as hard as she could, her heart was pounding with the exertion and fear, she didn't seem to be able to breathe fast enough and a stitch appeared in her side. The road was uphill and she was losing speed fast, she turned the next corner and left the gravel path, diving in between the trees. She blinked faster. She looked over her shoulder but couldn't see anyone following. She turned back to see where she was going, but not in time to avoid the tree on her left. She swerved, but her shoulder

hit the trunk. She grunted as she bounced off and landed on her side. The trees seemed to be falling down onto her, surrounding her. She scrambled to her feet. She had to get away, she didn't want to be crushed by all these trees. A dull pain from the hip she'd landed on registered briefly, but she was running again, telling herself to ignore the discomfort. Voices behind her made her heart jump in her chest.

“Do you see her?”

“This way!”

She carried on running away from the gravel road, still travelling along an uphill slope. Ahead of her, the trees were thinning and before she really had time to think she burst into an open space between the trees. She ran and yelped as she hit something solid, something that cut into her. Her hands came up and touched the barbwire fence. The shrubbery on the other side was no higher than her hips, but the growth was dense enough for a person to hide there. At a spot between two posts, where the wire would have a bit of slack, she crouched down and used her hands to pull two of the wires away from each other. She looked down at her injured hand, straining to keep the cry of pain contained. The wire was hitting the wound, usually the finger would have closed around it, but now the wire was rubbing across it. But she continued to pull at the wires, until she made a narrow crawl space for herself. She put one leg through, squeezed through the opening and pulled the other leg through. Her shirt caught on one of the barbs and she heard it rip as she pulled herself free. She headed for the fynbos, every breath ragged. The exertion and stress was too much. She fell to her knees and vomited. She grabbed hold of one of the plants and pulled herself upright, slowly she moved into the wild fynbos. The branches were prickly and the ground uneven and littered with dry branches and stones. Not small gravel stones, proper stones against which she knocked her toes, and seemed to cut into the fleshy part of her bridges. She stumbled and fell again. She stayed crouched down. Her feet hurt like hell. She looked up the hill. She wasn't going to make it, not at this speed. Out in the open, like this, her red shirt was a beacon. To a motorist it might be a sign that she needed help, but to Brent and Johnnie, it was a bull's-eye. She started crawling forwards on her hands and knees. She bit her lip to stop herself from crying out as she placed the injured hand on the ground. Each time she put the palm on the uneven ground the pain made her arm go numb. Her knees were aching even though she just moved a few inches. She moved slowly, trying not to show where she was.

She stopped to listen. She couldn't hear any yelling or running. She took a deep thankful breath. She imagined getting back to the house. She thought about how surprised her sister would be when she showed up. Nikki always teased her about being the less worldly one, the one who be unable to cope in dangerous situations. She moved forward a little bit. She put her injured hand down and drew in a sharp breath, but there was another noise. A sound beyond that of the insect chorus and far off bird song. Something twanged. She frowned. It sounded like someone pulling on a metal wire.

"She's gone over the fence!" Brent's voice was closer than she had thought possible.

Liza jumped to her feet, just in time to see Brent struggling to climb over the fence. She started running again, shoving the plants roughly aside. Behind her, she heard Brent jump to the ground and she the sounds of breaking branches and expletives followed her. Far above her, a car appeared. She waved her arms, hoping her colourful shirt would draw attention.

"Help me! Help!! Help!!"

Her body slammed to the ground as Brent tackled her. She broke through branches and shrubs and landed hard on the stony ground. Brent turned her around to face him, moving to sit on top of her, his body pinning her to the ground. His mouth and jaw were clenched. He snarled at her. She saw his lifted arm silhouetted against the sun and then his fist connected with her face. Her tongue hurt and she tasted blood. Her already blurry eyes refused to focus. She blinked and opened her eyes just in time to see his fist coming toward her again. She felt as though her cheekbones were being mashed together. Her brain was being compressed – knocked inward from one side, being squashed from the other side. He raised his clenched fist for a third time and then stopped.

"Fucking cow!"

She turned her head from side to side, trying to clear her vision. She groaned.

He got up, standing with his legs on either side of her, looking down. She turned her head to see where he was moving to. She could see his legs, but her eyes were still too blurry to make out his expression. His one leg moved, putting all his weight on the other foot. Her mind knew what was coming, but she couldn't roll away, there were too many plants on either side of her. The foot landed with a dull thud in her side, just beneath her ribs. Liza gave a strangled cry and instinctively curled into a ball. She rolled onto her side and held herself. She heard more

crashing through the indigenous plants. When she gazed up, she saw Johnnie standing above her. He was panting and leaning forwards with his hands on his knees.

“Idiot.” Brent sneered.

“Sorry, man.” Johnnie panted. “I didn’t think –”

“Of course you didn’t! What if she’d got away?”

“Come on, man.”

“You’re useless. Let’s get her back.”

Liza pulled herself into a tighter bundle. Each of the men grabbed an arm and pulled her upwards. For longer than she’d expected, she was able to keep her legs close to her chest, trying to pull herself back down to earth.

“Stand up!” Brent hissed in her ear. “Stand up, now, or that finger won’t be the last thing you’ll lose!”

Her legs dropped down. Her feet skimmed the stones and small bushes as the men dragged her along. The adrenaline had run its course through her body, leaving only exhaustion and pain. Her feet refused to take proper steps and most of her weight was on the men supporting her. At the fence, they paused.

“I’ll go through. Then lift so that she can get through and then you.”

Brent didn’t wait for a response. He climbed over the top, using the post to leverage himself over. On the far side, he bent down and pulled the wires apart as Liza had done earlier. Johnnie pushed and prodded Liza. She tried moving as fast as they demanded, but her muscles were worn and she struggled to keep herself from shaking. She cried out as one of the barbs left a long scratch along the inside of her leg. She collapsed the moment she was through. She sat with her legs folded loosely in front of her. Her head was hanging forward. Her eyes struggled to focus, she could see many red outlines on her legs, like a connect the dots picture completed by a toddler, the lines all randomly intersecting. Johnnie followed, cursing when his t-shirt caught in the barbs as Liza’s had done. The journey continued into the bluegum plantation. The return trip took much longer than her attempted escape. They finally reached the gravel road. Liza almost started to cry when she saw the van in front of the house. Johnnie let go of her arm to open the front door. In the daylight, Liza was able to see where she was being held. The house was painted a creamy beige colour. There was a garden with mostly white and blue

flowers, the type that didn't need lots of water. She strained her eyes, trying to clear the haziness. The door was a bright green and there was something written on it. She frowned and ground her teeth, they were right next to the door, she turned her head – the white plastic plaque bore the name *Hemel en Aarde Cottages no. 8*.

Brent let go of her arm when she was in the house. He placed a hand between her shoulder blades and shoved her forward. She stumbled, but as soon as she stood up straight, another shove threw her off balance. They reached the room where her stained mattress lay. Brent shoved her harder than before, and she fell onto the floor, just missing the mattress. She yelped as her knees and injured hand hit the tiles. She pulled her arm to her chest, tears forming in her eyes.

Brent grabbed her shoulder and turned her around, throwing her backwards so that her back landed against the mattress.

"Just remember, girl," he was bent down, his face right in front of her, his coffee breath hot on her face, "remember, we're just going to need you for a little longer. If we didn't, you wouldn't be here now. You'd be lying between those bushes, attracting flies and maggots." The last word trailed into a hiss. He patted the cheek he had punched and smiled. "You're going to have a lank shiner." He looked over his shoulder as Johnnie came in. "Grab the phone."

"Now?"

"Yeah, let's get this done." He turned back to Liza. "Just like yesterday, right, Liza? The quicker you convince your parents to pay, the sooner all this can be finished. Ask to talk to your parents. Tell them we want three million Rand and that you're afraid we'll kill you. Then I'll talk to them to give the instructions."

Johnnie placed the cell phone in Brent's outstretched hand. Brent dialled the number, put it on speaker and held it out for Liza. The phone rang once, twice.

Chapter 9: Incentive

Nikki sat up; her pillow fell from the couch and landed on the floor. Nikki didn't pick it up. She'd heard something outside. Or was she going paranoid? She'd heard noises all night long, creaking wood, rustling curtains. What was it this time? She tilted her head, listening. A car engine started and revved. She checked the time on her cell phone – early: five thirty am. Maybe someone was leaving for work or for home. She looked at the half light, visible through the windows. She could smell the ocean, even this far from the shore. She got up from the couch and opened the dining room blinds. The huge glass windows looked over Walker Bay. Her parents had chosen to build their someday retirement home in Hermanus Heights, an area on the slopes of the mountain, hemmed in by the nature reserve and the green grass of the golf estate. From where she stood, she had the same view as when standing at the front door: the curving bay, framed by mountains, with the sunlight already lightening a blue summer sky. Along the shoreline, she could see the other small towns on the other side of the bay. The dark green mountains were unmoving sentinels to the back and sides of the house. The sunrise was red, pink and orange over the ocean. The sandy seaweed smell was stronger, more than fresh, engulfing. She turned her back on the sight, feeling too guilty, too lonely to bathe in the beauty of another morning. Her mother had found the issue of the magazine which had published the article about their house. She'd left it on the dining room table to show to Detective Maritz. Nikki flipped it open to the correct page. It felt weird, looking at photographs of a place when she was actually there. She never understood tourists who bought travel guides and ended up looking at the travel guide pictures instead of spending time finding the best places themselves. She shook her head. She was a tourist in her parents' house. Her eyes drifted over the article text. She sighed - the journalist had managed to capture her mother's voice. It was obvious that the interview had taken place in the dining room with the massive window overlooking the bay.

This is our dream home. We can't wait to retire here. We're ready to sit here and look over the bay, whale watching and spending time together.

Whale watching? Really? Nikki tried to remember if her mother had ever gone down to the lookout points to see the whales lying in the bay. Hermanus was renowned as the best land-based whale watching location in the world. The Southern Right Whales, so named because

they were the ‘right’ whales to hunt, were annual visitors to Walker Bay. The whales were safe from human hunters, now only the tourists hunted them. The whole freaking town seemed obsessed with these creatures. The whales left their home in the colder arctic waters for a few months each year and vacationed in Hermanus. In the warmer waters of the bay, their babies were born and cared for. Each September the town hosted a whale watching festival. Nikki and a group of friends had driven through for it the previous year. The friends had talked about spending the night in a guesthouse or something. Nikki had kept quiet, not wanting to reveal the family holiday house. Not wanting to allow her friends access to her secrets.

They had wandered past all the stalls, no local art, just cheap sunglasses from China, wooden animals carved for the European and American tourists, and fast food stalls. Nikki had felt pessimism descend on her. She had waved to her friends, indicating that she would meet up with them at the lookout point. There, in the icy spring wind, she’d looked at the tourists crowding all around her. Some had high-tech cameras set up, others held binoculars, others were talking to the local icon ‘the whale crier’. He wore a black hat, white shirt and sunglasses. In his one hand, there was a huge horn made from kelp, and he wore a sign with the words ‘whale crier’ around his neck. She tried to figure out if the whale crier was supposed to be calling the whales, but he seemed more interested in just hanging around, chatting with the tourists. Somebody pointed to the water. The whale crier turned. He raised the horn and blew a loud deep note. Ah, Nikki thought, his job was thus to call tourists to wherever the whales were.

Nikki turned to look as well, just in time to see a whale launch its body from the water and crash back down again. “Wow.” She breathed, but too soon. The whale breached again, and a third time. “Cool.” Her friends were there, asking what they’d missed. Nikki tried to explain. She couldn’t. Standing there on the cliff face, looking over the blue-grey waters with the wind tugging at her jacket, she’d felt small for the first time in her life. For the first time she felt part of the large network of life criss-crossing this planet.

She’d tried to hold on to that feeling. She bought a couple of postcards with pictures of whales breaching, writing the date on the back and placing them carefully in her handbag. But the feeling quickly faded.

Nikki closed the magazine. That same night they’d gone out to a party. She’d met a guy and her whole life had shrunk back to keeping her social life alive between attending classes, writing essays, learning her lines and performing in front of her lecturers. She shook her head.

She felt guilty again. Liza had wanted them to connect this holiday. How hard would it have been? Nikki had felt connected to a whale, and yet she wasn't interested in building a relationship with her sister. Nikki had pretended to make an effort – go out to dinner, chat about boyfriends and movies they'd seen, watch television together, but she kept falling back on the same old excuses when she felt the bonding time wasn't working: they were too far apart in age, they were just too different, they didn't have anything in common. Now she was scared that her fake attempts will now be the only things she will remember, her last memories of her sister. Was she actually a bad person pretending to be a good one? Sometimes she didn't know the answer.

She turned away from the living room window. The steps up to her bedroom felt impossible, and walking up them took long, especially with her bruised knees. The bruises had turned a purplish-yellow. Two awful nights had left her drained. Her physical energy was failing, her adrenaline-fuelled panic tearing apart her emotional stability, her thoughts jumping from awful prospect to the next. Her sleep had been disturbed by dreams of dark rooms, men chasing her and sweaty hands grabbing hold of her. Each time she woke, she tried to straighten her mind, put some clear plan in place for the next morning. Now, with light turning from red to gold, she still wondered what she would do when the new day began.

She lay down and must have dozed again. The sound of the shower woke her. She heard the pipes creak and the water smack the floor. She sat up. Her hand had been trapped beneath her body and she shook the appendage to get rid of the pins and needles. The strong smell of coffee brewing hit her as she opened the door. She walked down the stairs and found her father in the kitchen. He lifted the coffee pot in a silent question. Nikki nodded. Neither spoke. He took hold of her shoulder and squeezed it for a second. She picked up her cup. Her father leaned against one of the kitchen counters. Nikki took up her post on the opposite side of the kitchen.

They'd kept Liza's phone plugged into a charger, just in case. In case of what, they weren't sure. Nikki checked her phone, her battery was getting a bit low. She unplugged her sister's phone and replaced it with her own. She touched Liza's phone screen. There it was. The picture they'd taken at the restaurant. Nikki put down her coffee. She put in Liza's code. After all these years, she was still using the same code. When Liza got home, Nikki promised herself, they were going to have a serious talk about pin codes and security and, the promise turned into a plea – please just let her get home safe. Eight messages. Eight! And a missed call. Nikki hadn't expected her sister to have such an active social life. The messages were from one of Liza's

old school friends. Nikki was amazed that they still kept in touch; she'd lost contact with all of her high school circle. She checked the missed call. It was from Juandr . The call had come in at about nine the previous evening. Who was Juandr ?

“Dad? Is Liza dating anyone?”

“No.”

High heels clicked towards the kitchen.

“Yes. Your sister is seeing someone.” Maggie West poured herself a cup of coffee. “He was studying with her, but now he’s working in Sandton somewhere.”

“Liza didn’t mention anyone.”

“Not to you maybe.”

Nikki took a deep breath. “What’s his name? Shouldn’t we call him?”

“Liza will be home soon. We shouldn’t worry too many people. The shower is open.” Maggie West looked straight at Nikki.

Nikki poured her coffee down the drain. The staircase silently challenged her again. Nikki held tightly to the banister, pulling herself up to where the bedrooms were. The water washed away her nightmares, but not her fears. She counted out her options, making plans, while the water burnt her skin and refreshed her mind. The doorbell rang while she was getting dressed. Downstairs she found Carol September sitting with her parents around the dining room table, her dad and September each had a cup of coffee in front of them, her mother had glass of Scotch in front of her. Nikki poured herself another cup of coffee and sat down a few seats away.

Carol September continued: “You have permission to clean the main bedroom. We couldn’t find any prints, they must have used gloves.” She looked down at her notepad. “Who would want to hurt you? Think about past business dealings. What about something personal? Friends who were left behind when your business took off? Anyone who took a particular interest in your lives or your daughters?”

Kenneth West looked to his wife. “When last did you hear from him?”

“I told you. I don’t have any more contact with him.”

Officer September cleared her throat. “Mrs West, any information that you withhold might further endanger your daughter. If there’s anyone we should talk to, then you need to tell me now.”

Maggie folded her arms over her chest.

Ken looked at his wife and then turned to Carol September. “Maggie was involved in some,” he coughed, “protests during the 1980s.”

Maggie drained her glass and stood up. She scraped her chair and walked out of the room.

Ken continued: “She was involved with a less than savoury crowd. She got into trouble. She came to London in 1989. That’s when we met.” He glanced over at Nikki. He held out his hand. Nikki took it and gave it a soft squeeze. He let go and pulled his hand back. “We had some trouble in the early 1990s. Some late night calls, some messages on the answering machine, a few times there were cars parked outside our home in London. We thought that some of the people she was involved with had found her.”

“When was this?”

“End of 1995.”

“Did you report this to the police?”

“No. They stopped.” He took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. “Mags said she took care of it.”

“I did.” Maggie West stood leaning against the doorway. Nikki noticed that the glass had been refilled. “It’s not important. They wouldn’t have taken Liza anyway.”

Nikki frowned. She didn’t remember much about their time before South Africa. The only memories she had of England were based on the pictures in their old family albums and more recent visits to her grandmother. Since her granddad had passed, her father tried to encourage the girls to visit their grandmother as often as possible. She couldn’t remember anything strange happening during their time there though. She wondered what Liza had really remembered and what she had decided to write about.

She looked up when she heard her name.

“What?”

“I was just asking if there’s any reason you can think of why they would want to take either you or Liza?”

“Um.” She looked over at her parents. “I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Like I said, she’s the good girl. I party a bit more, so I guess, I’m a bit more visible on the scene, you know. People tend to know about us. Dad and Mom get onto the social pages quite often and the magazine piece was pretty popular. Mom’s business is also really taking off, so she’s in all those home décor magazines. Many people in my class at university saw it. Maybe someone thought that it was an easy way to make cash.”

September tapped her pen against the notepad and sat up a little straighter. “We think that it must be someone who knows you personally. Someone who knows you well enough to know where you will be, who knows your names, who knows her phone number. Think carefully. Do you know anyone who might want to hurt Liza? Or maybe want to hurt you in some way? Someone you dumped or turned down or hurt in some way?”

Nikki gazed down into her coffee cup, examining the liquid. She was too tired to think. Her mind’s eye scrutinized her past choice of guys, of friends, of enemies. Crushes who faded in a cloud of petty arguments, BBF’s who only lasted a season and classmates who partied too much. She looked up to find Carol September’s eyes on her. “No. There’s nobody. Nobody who would do something like this.”

September nodded and made a note in her little book. She looked up, her mouth open to ask another question, when Maggie West spoke.

“There must be someone.” Nikki looked around. Her mother’s voice seemed to be directly behind her. It was sharp and ready to sting. “Every time we see you, there’s a new guy.”

Nikki tried to keep her face blank. “Like you’d know. I haven’t seen you in months.”

Maggie West stood up straighter, pushing herself away from the wall and balling her fists. “Whose fault is that? You’re ungrateful and selfish. Liza would never –”

“Yes, because Liza is so perfect. Just like you.” She felt the guilt bubble in her stomach. How could she sound so sarcastic about a sister who was in danger? “I didn’t mean that.”

“Maybe you did.”

Her father scraped his chair back, ready to play referee to their fight. He opened his mouth –

A telephone rang.

“My phone!” Nikki jumped up. She’d set the ringtone to sound like that of an antique telephone, a real ringing sound. The phone was in the kitchen, where she’d left it plugged into the phone charger. She ran through. Vaguely she heard the officer giving rapid instructions to her parents.

The phone rang a second time.

On the third ring, Nikki picked up and put the phone on speaker. “Hello?”

“Nikki?”

Something was wrong. Liza’s quavering voice terrified her. Something had changed since the previous call. “Are you okay? What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

Liza sobbed. She took a shuddering breath, the sound reverberating strangely over the phone speakers. “Is Dad there? I really need to talk to him. Please tell me he’s there?”

Nikki looked over her shoulder, her parents and the police officer had followed her into the kitchen. “Yeah, he’s right here. Don’t worry, we’re going to get you back.”

Her father stepped closer and put a hand on Nikki’s shoulder. Nikki pressed her lips together.

“Dad?”

“Oh, sweetheart, I can hear you. Are you all right? Have they hurt you?”

There were muffled voices on the other side of the line. Someone had placed a hand over the phone.

Liza spoke again. “Hello? Dad? Are you still there?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Ken West leaned closer to the phone, putting his mouth closer to the mouthpiece. Tilting his head and putting his ear closer to the phone whenever her crackly voice came through the line.

“Dad. They want money, Dad. Please, please. I just want to come home.”

Nikki pulled her arms closer to her body, hugging herself with one arm while placing her fingers over her mouth. Something was wrong. Something Liza wasn’t saying.

Liza’s spoke again. “Dad, they want three million Rand. Dad, I’m scared. I think they’re going to kill me if you don’t pay.”

There was a rustling, movements. A deeper voice came through the speakers. “Pretty Liza wants to come home, and it’s up to you to make it happen. We want the money by tomorrow morning. Nicola, the devoted little sister, will deliver it. Further instructions will follow. Ah, just one last thing – you might want to check your mailbox.” He paused. “Liza just wants to say one last thing.”

“Dad, are you listening?”

“Yes, sweetheart. I’m listening. Go ahead.”

They heard her take a breath.

“*Hemel and Aarde!*” She was shouting. “No...!” Then the line went dead.

“Oh no, oh no. What are they doing to her?”

“*Hemel en Aarde?*” Her dad looked over at officer September. “Do you think that’s where they are holding her?”

September had already dialled a number on her cell phone. “Detective. The call came. Money, three million. Hmm. Uh-huh. I’ll check now. Liza managed to get a message to us. Yes, she said ‘*Hemel en Aarde*’. Ja. There was a man who also spoke, he said to look in the mailbox. Should we go or wait for you? Understood. We’ll wait.” She put the phone back in her pocket. “Detective Maritz is on his way. He said to wait before we go to the mailbox.”

Her father was shaking his head. “What if it’s something we need now?”

“Detective Maritz will be here soon. He’s leaving the police station now. The kidnapper is asking for three million delivered tomorrow. Can you get the money by then?”

Her mother looked at her father. Her father put his hands on the counter and shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t have that much readily available.”

“There must be some way to get it?” Maggie West asked.

Kenneth West kept shaking his head. “I might be able to get two. How can they expect that much?” He took a deep breath. “Let me make a few calls.”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and started dialling. He walked out of the kitchen and Nikki could hear his strained voice echoing through the house.

“Are you advising us to pay?” Maggie was leaning back against the kitchen counter, her eyes fixed on Warrant Officer September. She was pale and kept swallowing, as though she had a bad taste in her mouth.

“Mrs West, I am not advising anything.” September was speaking slowly, carefully saying each word before moving onto the next. “The detective will be here soon.”

“What about the clue she gave? Shouldn’t you send someone there straight away?”

“Mam’, we’re just going to have to take this one step at a time. Like I said -”

“Yes, yes, the detective will be here soon.” Margaret West turned away, placing her hands on the marble countertop. Nikki could hear her breathing deeply. Without turning back to face officer September, she spoke again. “Her diabetes. Oh no, we should have said something to those bastards about that. She’s always managed it so well, learnt so quickly. What if that’s why she sounds so bad? That must be it.” She suddenly turned around, addressing the policewoman directly. “What do you think will happen to Liza?”

“She was strong enough to send us this message. This means that she probably either saw the place she’s being held, or found out something about it. And she had to have known that they would hurt her if she gave this information to us, she has to be strong enough to make decisions about what to tell us and what not to.” Carol September caught Nikki’s eye. “We just have to keep believing that she’ll stay strong.”

Nikki realised that she was still standing in the same posture. She moved her fingers away from her lips. “Why would she say something that would get her hurt?”

“She might be getting desperate. She might think that we have a good chance of catching up with them there. At this stage, we just have to hold on to the facts and try to do something about it without getting emotional.”

“Without getting emotional! How the fuck are we supposed to do that?” Margaret turned around. She was frowning, her eyes narrowed. “You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Mom. Please.”

“Shut up. This is all your fault!”

The sudden silence made Nikki’s ears ring.

“What is going on?” Kenneth looked from one woman to the next. “Mags? Nikki, apologise to your mother!”

“I didn’t do anything!”

Margaret West was shaking. “No, you did. It’s your fault.” She was looking straight at Nikki. “You were out with a boy when she was taken. What were you thinking? Hang on, what were you thinking?” She took a step forward. “Did you have anything to do with this?”

Nikki felt her eyes tearing up. “How could you think that?”

“You were always jealous of her.”

“That’s not true.”

“You’re always asking for money.”

“Mom.”

“Stop it, Mags.”

“Why couldn’t it have been you?”

“Mags, you don’t mean that.”

“You’re thinking the same thing. Nikki’s not diabetic. She wouldn’t be dying right now if they took her. She’s the one that’s always out there, showing off and getting into trouble. She should’ve been taken.”

Nikki’s chest was tight. “How could you say that?”

Carol September cleared her throat. “Mr and Mrs West, we are investigating all possible angles.”

“Nikki as well?” Kenneth sounded surprised.

“All possibilities. However, at this stage, there is nothing, nothing at all,” Carol September spoke firmly and her eyes fixed on Margaret West, “to indicate any involvement.”

Nikki kept her eyes on the police officer. She wasn’t sure how she felt about being pushed to the side through the officer’s interruption. The fight should have stayed between her and her mother. She felt the anger still on the edge of her tongue and the bitterness making her stomach boil. She wanted to keep on fighting. Yes, she shouldn’t have left her sister alone the whole

time, but on the other hand, they were both grown women. Neither of them had come to be babysat. She moved her eyes. Her mother was looking at the silent telephone. Her mom was breathing deeply, her shoulders tense beneath her designer clothing, her red lips set in a hard line. Margaret West also hadn't been ready to stop the fight.

Kenneth West was also looking at his wife, he took a step towards his wife and put an arm around her waist. "It will be okay. We'll find Liza."

The front gate bell chimed through the house. September glanced out of the window and opened the gate without asking. "He'll want to check the mailbox first." Kenneth nodded. He kept his arm around his wife's waist as they followed the officer. Nikki stood for a moment before following them into the bright morning sun. The police had parked outside the gate. Detective Maritz was busy pulling on gloves, his eyes shaded by dark glasses, wearing dark jeans and a light blue golf shirt. He nodded a general greeting to those gathering around him.

"So what exactly did the man say?"

September checked her notebook. "That the family should check the mailbox. That's it."

"Right. Do I need a key?" The mailbox was set into the brick wall, with a small metal door on the side of the house through which mail could be retrieved.

Kenneth shook his head. "We never get any personal mail here. It's always open."

Maritz nodded and slowly turned the small handle, pulling the door open. The small group gathered around him. Maritz bent down slightly, peering into the dark interior. He reached in and pulled out a white padded envelope. He held it up, turning it around. There wasn't any writing on it, no marks of any kind. Maritz led the little group up the front steps and into the house.

"Do you have a plastic sheet or bag?" He pulled off the dark glasses as he directed the question at Nikki. With numb fingers and only half a thought for what she was doing, she searched through a few drawers in the kitchen, until she found some cling wrap. She spread the plastic over the dining room table. Maritz opened the envelope, tearing the paper. He pulled the two sides apart and looked inside. His face grew hard. He looked up, his eyes resting on each face in turn. He turned the envelope upside down, spilling the contents onto the table. The finger rolled out, the momentum almost rolling it completely around as it came to rest on the table. Nikki felt something happening to her stomach muscles. Her mother let out a strangled cry and

collapsed. Her father caught his wife and put her onto one of the easy chairs. Nikki's stomach pushed up the little food and liquid she'd consumed the last day and her throat constricted. She ran. Her feet slipped on the kitchen tiles and she just reached the kitchen sink before vomiting again. She rinsed her mouth. She wanted to keep throwing up, but there was nothing left in her. She walked back to the dining room, her knees threatening to deposit her face first onto the tiles. She managed to sit down on one of the dining room chairs, placing one of her hands over her mouth when her eyes caught sight of the finger again. Her father's hands had formed fists, one of which he jammed into his mouth.

Maritz and September were both examining the finger. Maritz picked up the envelope and looked into it again. "There's something else." He turned the envelope upside down and shook it. A piece of paper followed and landed beside the severed digit. Maritz reached down and turned it over.

There were reddish stains all around it. In bold letters was written: PAY.

Chapter 10: Driving Blindly

“Will Liza be okay?” Nikki spoke through her fingers. She felt unable to move her muscles.

“There’s not much bleeding with an amputated finger. She should be fine, as long as they stopped the bleeding. I’m guessing that they dropped off the package sometime after 2 am. That’s about the time I left for home. Early this morning maybe. We’ll check if anybody saw anything. And you heard her voice on the phone this morning, right?” Nikki nodded dumbly, her fingers still keeping her lips pressed together. “So she’s still alive and able to give you a message. Now she just has to keep the wound clean and protected to avoid infection.”

Maggie West was shaking. “Diabetics are more prone to infections. Their blood circulation, especially to the extremities, is exceedingly poor. She’s going to have an infection within a couple of hours.” Maggie West placed a hand over her heart.

Kenneth West put an arm around his wife’s shoulders

Nikki quickly moved her hands away from her mouth. “Hang on! I heard a car outside the house this morning! It woke me up. Someone was really revving the engine, but when I looked outside it was already gone.”

“What time was it?” September had taken out her notebook again.

“About six-ish. No, half past five.”

“We’ll see if anyone saw something at about that time. I need to take this down to the police station. We might be able to get fingerprints from the envelope. I’ll be back soon.”

Maritz left. September sat down with her parents. Nikki stood off to one side. She cleared her throat. “I’m, uh, just going to get some air.” Her father looked up and nodded. Her mother was sitting with her back to her. She didn’t even move.

The car keys were hanging in the kitchen. Nikki took them. Liza’s phone was still there on the kitchen counter. Nikki picked it up. Juandr . If she had a boyfriend, she would want him to know what was happening. She typed in Liza’s code – when Liza got back they would have a

talk about using the year you were born as a password – and went to the messaging option. The message she typed was simple:

Hi. Sorry very busy. Will call you when I can.

Nikki hesitated. Should she end it with love? When Liza came back, she could explain the loveless message. She pressed ‘send’ and put down the phone.

Her bag was still in the hall, where she had left it almost two days before, as was Liza’s. She pulled out her wallet from between the folds of her bag. Her fingers brushed past sunscreen, sunglasses and touched sand at the bottom of the bag. Little mementos. Her hands dug into her sister’s bag. She found Liza’s pouch with emergency insulin pens. She put the black pouch in her own bag. Just in case. She climbed into her red Renault. She sat in the car and cried. She leant her forehead on the steering wheel and crossed her arms over the top, shoulders shuddering. They would continue talking about possible suspects, about ways to find Liza, without actually doing anything. She needed to be somewhere else, to do something other than sitting and answering questions.

As she drove down the driveway, she saw September on the front steps waving at her. Nikki ignored the policewoman, picked up speed and drove quickly through Hermanus Heights. The whole neighbourhood was made up of mansions with irrigated lawns. Ceiling-high glass frontages glittered in the sunlight. Just a kilometre further, the tar road turned into a dirt track. On the one side, the golf course was green and interspersed with trees swaying in the wind. In the distance, she could see the shimmering ocean. The mountain and nature reserve stretched along on the other side. All she could think about was her sister’s hand with four fingers. She blinked, trying to get the image out of her mind. Instead, her mind responded with the thought that the finger had looked like a pinkie. She drove down the hilly dirt stretch and reached the tar road. She turned left, towards the sea. Soon she had driven into the Voëlklip area. Teenagers were carrying boogie boards and heading towards the beaches. Mothers with toddlers in prams were resolutely heading towards the beach, walking along the busy pavement. A couple, the man carrying an enormous beach umbrella over his shoulder, were dodging a group of pre-teens on bikes. It was all so banal, so normal.

Nikki drove on. She reached the turn off to Voëlklip beach. She looked right. The sloping road had cars parked on either side of it. The endless ocean was at the bottom of the hill. Nikki opened her window. The freshness of the sea air streamed into the car. Nikki closed her eyes, wanting to run down to the water and let the coolness of it wash her clean. A car behind her

hooted. Nikki turned left. She pulled into the driveway of a neat holiday home with little blue windowsills and flowering pots all around the front door. There was a “For Sale” sign planted between the pots. She climbed out and rang the doorbell.

“Nikki?” Dom was frowning at her.

“Hi. Is Michael here?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Do you want to come in?”

“Yes.”

He stepped aside to let her in. The house was a mix of creams and blues with more sea-themed bric-a-brac than she’d ever seen. There were little lighthouse figures, seashell pictures on the throw pillows, beach scene paintings, even a replica boat anchor mounted behind the bar. The sea smell pouring in through the windows was just as strong as she’d smelt in her car.

“Hey, make yourself comfortable. I’ll call Mike.”

She regarded the couch, trying to decide if she would be able to get up again after being enfolded by the massive pillows.

“Nikki?”

“Michael.”

“What are you doing here?” He was rubbing his hair as if his scalp itched. “Have they found your sister?”

She shook her head. “No. We’re still looking.” She saw Dom coming back into the living room. He stood off to one side, but his dark eyes were focussed on her.

Nikki cleared her throat. “Can we talk outside?”

“Sure. Come on.” He led the way through the kitchen door. It led out to a rough garden bordered by wild fynbos – proteas, erica’s and restio’s and facing the mountainside. Michael indicated a bench off to the one side. He sat down, but Nikki stayed standing. “What’s up?”

“My sister is still gone. The police think that someone we know might be involved. I just want to know,” she took a deep breath, “were you? Did you tell anyone where we were or when there would be someone alone at the house?”

“What? Nikki, of course not. Listen, if someone was involved, it wasn’t me. I mean, what do I have against your sister?”

“If it’s just about money, then you don’t need to have something against her.”

“Money?”

She swallowed. “That’s what he wants.”

Michael leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees and clasped his hands in front of him.

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shit man, I’m sorry.”

Nikki’s knees buckled and she sat down heavily next to Michael. “Nobody asked you anything about me after we went out? Nobody wanted to just ask something about my family?”

“No. No one. And the police also asked me some of these questions. Really, the only person I’ve met since being on holiday is you. I have to go back to my studies and work next week, so Dom and I are just chilling. He met a girl, but said that it wasn’t serious. Just casual, you know. She didn’t even know about you or anything.”

Nikki put a hand over her eyes. Michael reached out and took her hand. She let him. It felt comforting to have someone hold her, even if it was just her hand. Her hand with five fingers. The sounds from the beach drifted up to them. Crashing waves, laughing children, a garbled announcement through a lifeguard loudspeaker. Behind them, the sounds from the mountain drifted down. A bird, the sounds of hardy plant leaves brushing against each other in the wind, an assortment of insects chirping and buzzing.

Nikki dropped her hand. “Come with me.”

“What?”

“Liza said ‘*Hemel en Aarde*’ on the phone. He must be holding her there. I want to go looking for her.”

“Aren’t the police doing that?” He sounded nervous again.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I’ve got a feeling that they’re not telling me everything.”

Michael shook his head. “Nikki, this is one seriously bad dude. What are we going to do if we even find him?”

“It’ll be two against one if you come with. Better chances to do whatever I’m going to do if you’re there as well.”

“Shit. You’re crazy. I guess... Hey, I’ll ask Dom to come with as well. More manpower, you know.”

Nikki bit her lip. “Okay. You ask him then.”

Michael nodded. They found Dom stretched out on the couch, watching a movie on television with a large electric fan playing across his arms and chest. His shirt buttons were undone, the two parts of the shirt flapping as the fan moved across. Nikki couldn’t help noticing the toned muscles. His olive skin was darkened by the sun, his dark hair falling neatly across his forehead. He worked out for that physique.

“Hey.” Dom turned the television off. “You okay, Nikki?”

“Not really.”

“Nikki wants to go to the *Hemel en Aarde* Valley. She thinks Liza might be somewhere there.”

Dom stood up, throwing the television remote down on the couch. It bounced off and hit the floor, its batteries popping out and rolling noisily across the floor. “Shit,” he said looking at the mess on the floor. “Why there?”

“She gave Nikki a message on the phone.”

“What are you going to do there?”

“We’re going to look around.” Nikki answered, her eyes following the progress of one of the batteries as it rolled further away, coming to stop beneath the coffee table. “Liza has diabetes. She needs her medicine. I brought her emergency medicine kit with, if we can find her, then I can get her insulin to her. I’m sorry, this is a lot to ask, but I need to do something.”

“Come on, Dom. Come with. We can’t let Nikki go alone.”

Nikki was already in the car by the time the two of them emerged from the house. Michael climbed into the passenger seat and Dom in the back. Nikki ignored the mood as she sped towards the main road that would take them through the length of Hermanus and out. She reached the large roundabout where they had to wait for their turn. After what felt like an age,

she was able to take a gap and exit onto the main town road. Although a double lane way, the road meandered gently past homes and guesthouses until it reached the central business area. Nikki swore as she had to slow for pedestrians every few meters. It was hectically busy in town every holiday season. The traffic was heavy and the traffic lights maddeningly slow. The main road, instead of running in a straight line, took a sharp turn to the left, before leaving the town. Liza passed the main franchises, their colourful signs winking at possible customers. After the turn, they drove past the post office with a queue of locals and holiday makers spilling out of its doors, the Afrikaans church, its parking lot full with weekday shoppers, the police station painted pink, the courts looking sleepy and quiet this close to the Christmas break.

Michael was biting his fingernails. He was looking out the passenger window, watching the tourists and shops speed by. Dom was quiet. When she looked in the rear view mirror, his eyes met hers. She swallowed and moved her eyes to the tar and white lines in front of her.

The roads were busy with new holidaymakers flowing into Hermanus one way and others trying to get out. Soon she saw the road sign for the *Hemel en Aarde* Valley. The entrance to the boutique wine farm community was just outside the town, opposite the entrance to the Sandbaai neighbourhood.

“Hey, there’s the police.” Dom exclaimed.

Nikki glanced quickly to her left. There were three police cars, traffic police. The traffic police were already waving down cars coming out of the valley.

“Maybe they’re setting up a roadblock?” Michael offered. “That’s great. If the guys who have Liza want to get away, they’ll catch them.” His voice held a hopeful note. Nikki knew that he wanted to dissuade her.

She slowed down the car. “I think that we should drive into every farm, show Liza’s photo and ask if anyone has seen her.”

“That all? Of course the guy who took her won’t admit to seeing her.”

“No,” she said, failing to keep the irritation out of her tone, “but maybe he’s hiding out on someone’s farm. Listen, the valley is huge. There is no way she would have known where she was unless he either told her - and I don’t see that coming up in usual kidnapper-hostage talk - or she got out and saw a sign or a name or something. That’s the only way she could have known where she was. And if she got out, maybe someone saw her.”

“It’s a stretch.” Dom leant forward between the two front seats, popping his head out between them like a jack in the box to deliver his opinion.

“Well, what else should we do?”

Dom tilted his head to the side. “Don’t ask me. Oh shit.” There was the sound of a phone vibrating. Dom sat back.

The rear view mirror showed Nikki that Dom had the phone out. The vibration stopped. Nikki looked ahead of her again. “It’s the best we’ve got. We’ll show the pictures, we’ll ask if anyone’s seen anything unusual and, um, we’ll go from there.”

They would have driven past the first farm if Dom hadn’t pointed it out. The tar road immediately switched to dirt and they bumped along the uphill drive until they came to a wine tasting venue.

“Come on.” Nikki said, unbuckling her seatbelt. She led the way into the square building where a young girl waited behind a smooth wooden countertop.

“Good morning! How are you today?” She had three piercings in the one ear and a nose stud. Her hair was dyed completely black and drawn back into a ponytail, which bobbed behind her as though it was straining to move independently. Either she was still in school or had just left it the month before.

Nikki cleared her throat. “Hi. Sorry, we’re not here to taste. We just want to ask a few questions.”

The girl kept smiling. “Sure.”

Nikki pulled out her cell phone and found the picture she’d shown the police. “Have you seen her?”

The girl leaned over the counter. “Oh, the police were here with the same picture!” She looked up. “Are you, like, sisters?”

“Yeah. We’re like sisters.” Nikki leant forward on the wooden countertop. “When were the police here?”

The girl shrugged. “An hour ago. It was intense, ‘cause we don’t get police coming to the tasting venue, you know, and they wanted to speak to the manager, but I’m the tasting room manager, well, for the summer at least, so I was getting really annoyed and then they asked all

those questions, but we had some tourists waiting to taste. It was unreal.” She spoke fast, her voice interrupted here and there when she took a loud, smacking bite into her bubblegum.

“What else did they ask?”

“Um, if I’d seen her. If any strange cars have been using this road or been seen driving up and down a lot. If we’d heard any shouting or screams we couldn’t account for. Stuff like that. Creepy, hey? I thought it was a prank then, ‘cause it sounded like Punk’d or Candid Camera or something and a little bit of a horror movie too. So it’s real? Where’s your sister?”

“She’s missing.”

“What, really? That is so crap. I mean, I don’t know what I would do if my sisters were gone, but I probably won’t miss them that much, they’re such brats. But your sister looks really pretty. And we never think things like this happen to real people, right? It’s always someone else on the news or some other town. I mean, we do have crime here and stuff, but I really hope you find her.”

Their little group trudged back to the car. Just before they reached it, Dom’s phone rang again. He looked down at the caller identification. “Hold on, I need to get this.” He turned away from the car. “I can’t talk now.”

Nikki and Michael continued on. Nikki unlocked the car and Michael immediately climbed in and slouched down on the seat. Nikki climbed in, but did not close her door. She half turned her head towards Dom, wanting to hear, feeling guilty about her curiosity.

“I told you, I’ve got it under control. No, I can’t talk now. No, no. I’ll call you later.”

Dom put his phone back in his pocket. He climbed into the back. “Crazy woman. Sorry about that. So what now?”

The two guys looked to Nikki, waiting for her to make the next decision. She put her hands on the steering wheel, looking directly in front of her, and ignoring the intent gazes from the side and the back.

“Even if,” she swallowed, “even if the police are doing this as well, they might not be getting to everyone around here. Of course they would be doing this as well, they heard her on the phone.” She shook her head. “At least they’re doing something other than asking questions. Anyway, maybe they missed one of the farms or maybe they miss someone walking along the

side of the road. We have to keep going.” Her phone started ringing. Nikki checked the caller identification. Her dad. She pressed the ignore button and quickly switched off the phone.

“Nikki.” Michael put a hand on one of hers. “The police probably know all these farms or have a map or something. We’re just driving blindly.”

“Driving blindly is better than doing nothing.” She pulled her hand away from under his and started the car engine.

*

No. Nope. Sorry. Haven’t seen her.

There weren’t any other answers.

It was after lunchtime and they were on another random road, where a driveway had led them past the restaurant and to the top of a hill. The restaurant was all glass panes and green metal windows frames, architecture designed to assimilate into the surrounding environment. Nikki switched off the car and looked past the glass structure and over the valley.

She shook her head. “It’s impossible.” From where they stood, only a small portion was visible, the rest disappearing between folds and ridges. “I didn’t know it was this big.”

“We should just go back.” Michael shook his head beside her.

Dom’s cigarette lighter clicked twice, before it spat out a flame and he drew a breath of nicotine deep into his lungs.

“If we go back, then the police would be able to tell us where they’ve been and where not. We could help them cover the areas they haven’t been able to reach.” Michael’s voice was getting on her nerves. It had a whiney edge to it.

The wind was stronger now. It whipped Nikki’s hair out of her face and then blew it forward to cover her eyes. She pushed it back again. The wind made the fynbos sway, the flowers bend toward and away from them. The leaves glittered like broken pieces of glass. She supposed there must be some sort of layer on the leaves that reflected the sunlight. Small farm worker cottages with solar heating panels winked at her from the bottom of the valley. She looked over the valley. She could see why someone had dubbed it the *Hemel en Aarde Vallei* - the Heaven and Earth Valley. The natural beauty didn’t really matter though. Somewhere, somewhere

down in the middle of the valley or up along the slopes, Liza was being held. Somewhere between this heaven and earth, somewhere close, her sister was waiting.

On the phone, Liza had sounded wrong. There had been something badly amiss. Was it just from the finger or was it her diabetes? Since being diagnosed at fourteen, Liza had never gone this long without her medication. Liza's early teen years had been terrible. She would need to run to the toilet every couple of hours, she had been thirsty all the time, and had seemingly compulsively gained weight and lost it again. Her mother first suspected that Liza had bulimia. A half dozen trips to three different psychologists later, one had suggested that they should visit a doctor next. The diagnosis had been a relief. In typical organised Liza fashion, she had quickly become comfortable with injecting the insulin, exercising more regularly, and had become neurotic about planning her meals. Liza needed the insulin. Nikki thought of the little black box in her bag. What had been the plan here? What had she imagined? That she could just leave the little black case somewhere on the roadside or at a wine tasting room with a big sign saying "Liza's Insulin!" How stupid could she be? The valley was just too big. She looked up and down along the main road leading through the valley. It was impossible to know where Liza was. The kidnapper could be keeping her closer to Caledon or hidden on a farm. He could even have moved her after that phone call.

"How are we going to find her?" Nikki heard her voice crack, before the wind whipped her words away as well.

"We have to go back." Michael's voice was that of a defeatist.

"No."

"Hell, Nikki, we've done all we can." Michael kicked a nearby plant. He walked away, still kicking at plants or stones. He gave a yelp and went down on one knee. "Ow! I think I twisted my ankle." Nikki glanced back, her lips pursed. She thought that it was too bad that he hadn't fallen down the side of the valley. He got up and hobbled to the car. There he pulled open the door, climbed into the back, and slammed the door. Nikki watched him, until he lay down and disappeared behind the car's bodywork.

Dom was still next to her – having ignored Michael's complaints, groans and the slamming of the door. He lit another cigarette and held out the packet to her. She took one of the offered cigarettes and accepted the lighter. She inhaled, trying to relax. She'd expected Dom to be the one who would hang back, who would nag and sulk. Instead, he'd been the one who'd

suggested which roads to take and that they should talk to farm workers, not just the girls tending the wine sales and tasting tables.

She turned to Dom. “What do you think, Dom?”

Dom took a final pull before crushing the cigarette beneath his sandals. “I don’t know. I think Michael is right. This is starting to look like too big a job for the three of us.” He played with his lighter, tossing it from one hand to the next, each time pretending to weigh it before tossing it again. “What do you think?” He repeated her question back to her. “It’s your call, really.”

She nodded. “Give me a minute.”

Dom walked to the car, his sandals crunching over the loose stones.

Nikki crouched down and extinguished her cigarette on the stony ground. The stump sat there, squashed against the stones and dirt. Nikki stood on the edge for a while longer before she also turned and headed to the car. The wind tugged at the car door, almost pulling it out of her hand, before she managed to close it behind her and start the engine. Dom was now sitting on the front passenger seat. She looked over her shoulder. Michael was lying on his back, his one arm over his eyes. What the hell was his problem? It was her sister that was missing. What had she actually seen in him? She put the car into gear and drove back down to the main road.

She drove slowly back towards the valley entrance. The closer they came, the tighter her chest felt. Now that they were lower down again, she realised how tight the valley’s mouth really was. The last few turns were taken in slow motion, Nikki’s eyes looking more to the side and back than to the tarred road in front of her. They reached the last part of the road, before it joined the highway going into Hermanus. The police cars they had seen when they had driven into the valley were now organised into a proper roadblock with traffic police assisting. Nikki slowed down further. A police officer was standing in the middle of the road and waving her over to the gravel stretch on the side. There were already a few other cars parked there, each with a police officer leaning towards the driver’s window, showing a picture, checking the other passengers in the vehicle. Nikki stopped and rolled down her window, ready for the same treatment.

“Good afternoon, Miss. Can I see your license?”

Nikki pulled out her license card from her wallet.

The police officer raised his eyebrows when he looked at the card, his eyes moved from her face back to her license. He pulled out a photograph from his pocket, checked it and then turned the photo around so that she could see it. It was the same one she'd given to the police. "Sisters?"

Nikki nodded.

"What were you doing in the valley today, Miss?"

"I was trying to find my sister."

"Any luck?"

She shook her head.

He handed back her license card. "Your family is looking for you. There was a message to keep an eye out for you."

Nikki rolled her eyes. Typical.

"You can go." The officer waved her on and turned to the next car.

"Thanks." She called, even though she knew his attention had moved from her.

She dropped Michael and Dom off and drove back to her parents' house. She pulled into the driveway. She was still busy gathering her phone and bag, when she saw her mother coming out of the house. Nikki ignored her. Her bag must have fallen open during the drive and its contents were scattered along the feet area of the passenger seat. Her phone had slid beneath the seat and she had to dig to find it. She glanced into her bag, checking all the different items: phone, wallet, lip-ice, keys. Hang on, the little black case. It had to be beneath the seat as well. Her fingers searched blindly under the passenger seat. When she looked up again, her mother was still standing at the top step, her arms folded across her chest, her lips drawn tight and her face still immovable. Nikki wondered if it took a lot of effort to keep it so completely controlled. She and Liza had speculated about whether or not their mother was getting Botox injections. Damn, she'd have to look for the case again a bit later.

Nikki climbed out and locked the car. She kept her eyes focussed on the door, on the garden and water-feature next to the front steps, the paving stones, as she stepped closer to the house.

"Where were you?" Nikki could smell the alcohol on her mother's breath.

"Out."

“Were you alone?”

Nikki walked up the steps. Just before she passed into the front door, her mother grabbed her arm, holding her back. Nikki felt long, manicured nails digging into her skin.

“Tell me.”

Nikki shrugged, trying to loosen her arm. “I was looking for Liza, okay? Two friends came with.”

Her mother let go of her arm. Nikki rubbed the place on her arm, still cool from her mother’s touch. Her mom always had cold hands.

“Friends? What friends?”

“Just two guys. Drop it, Mom.”

Her mother crossed her arms again, holding tightly against her chest. “The police already suspect you, and then you go wandering around in the area where Liza is?”

“I wasn’t wandering. I was searching.”

Her mother shook her head and walked into the house. Nikki stayed outside for a few minutes more, feeling the late afternoon sun on her neck and back. It felt like those games she’d played as a child, where a friend would write a word on her back and then she’d have to guess what it was. She felt her skin warming up. She moved her neck when it started to burn. She closed her eyes. She thought about her sister, but it felt too hard, too draining. Instead, her mind drifted.

*

“Dad, Mom. Can I talk to you quickly?”

Her father looked up from his newspaper. They’d given up print media a while back, and her dad was still chuffed with the idea of reading the news on his tablet. She knew that he scanned the major news headlines, but tended to rush past all these in order to get to the market and business news. Her mother was drinking coffee and studying her choice of digital newspaper, and she took a longer while before she locked her tablet and lifted her eyes. Nikki had wondered why her parents would order the same newspaper on two different devices. When she borrowed her mother’s tablet, she’d realised that her mother chose a much more political publication. Mostly editorial pieces, commentating on all the current headlines. She’d been surprised.

Now she cleared her throat. “I received my university acceptance letters.”

“Oh, yes?” Her father put down his tablet. “WITS as well, like your sister?”

“No. I mean, yes. I got into WITS, but I don’t want to go there.” She took a deep breath and smiled. “I got into UCT as well.”

Her mother got up, walked over to the coffee maker and poured herself another cup. “I thought you were only going to apply to universities in the Gauteng area.” Her mother turned around, sipping the dark liquid.

“I needed more options.”

“Well, that’s great, sweetheart. Which course did you get into?” Her father was trying to work up enough enthusiasm to cover her mother’s animosity.

“Drama.”

“Drama?” Both parents repeated the word together.

“Yes. I want to study drama and theatre. I have been accepted on the condition that I come down for an audition in a couple of weeks. It’s a really exclusive programme –”

“What the hell are you going to do with a drama degree?” Her mother burst out. “Do you want to make soap opera episodes for the rest of your life? Or become some high school drama teacher?” Her mother’s voice was indignant. She put down the cup of coffee. “You ‘re being ridiculous.”

“I’ve been talking to some of the older students. There’s not a lot of pure dramatic work out there, but there are other opportunities as well.”

Her father cleared his throat. “Why not project management or public relations, like we discussed?”

“Because I can’t be Liza. I can’t be you or Mom, or auntie Joanie or Grandma. I want to be something different.” She took a deep breath, relieved that the speech she’d been rehearsing had sounded so good when said aloud.

“I, I, I. You’re just thinking of yourself.”

“Mags, please. Sweetheart, if this is what you really want...”

“You’re letting her get away with this?”

“Mags, all she wants to do is go study.”

“She wants to waste our money on something useless.”

Her parents faced each other. Her father stood up. “I have to go to work.” He turned to Nikki. “Sweetheart, start all your planning. You can go.”

Her mother’s heels clickety clacked from the room, slamming doors alerting them to her progress through the house.

*

She opened her eyes and looked into the interior darkness of the house, her eyes, used to the brightness outside, couldn’t see inside at all. Her eyes adjusted and she saw the vague shapes of people moving about inside. She had just stepped inside when her father and detective Maritz came towards the front door.

“Dad.” Nikki started.

“Sweetheart, I can’t talk right now.” He looked through the front door. “I need you to move your car. Detective Maritz and I have to go through to Cape Town.”

“Okay.” She held her keys ready and turned to face the front door. “What time will you be back?”

“Only tomorrow.”

She looked over her shoulder, seeing her father and the detective following her. “Tomorrow?”

“I have to get the money. The banks here do not have enough cash for me.”

“Do you have that much money?”

Her father’s face was grim and strained. “No. Not accessible. I’ll have to see what I can do.”

Nikki moved her car. Her father climbed into the Mercedes. She’d expected the detective to join him, but instead Maritz jogged through the gate to where his car was parked and climbed into it. Her father reversed and followed Maritz out of the cul de sac and out of sight. Dad hadn’t even said goodbye.

Chapter 11: Hyperglycaemia

Liza opened her eyes, and tried to open them again, before realising that she was in total darkness. *The box*. The bastards had put her back in the box. She wondered what woke her. Her head was throbbing. Her heart was beating too fast. Her tongue was thick, her mouth and lips dry. She tried to swallow. She tried to cough. She tried to call out for water. Her whole body was covered in sweat. She moved her hands to knock against the wood to get some attention. She cried out in pain. The one side of her left hand was on fire. She tried to sit up. She bumped her head against the top of the box. She lay back down again, her head almost splitting with pain. She felt confused. The last thing she remembered – she didn't want to think about it. She was breathing warm, stale air. She closed her eyes. Maybe if she fell asleep, the pain would go away, or at least linger in reality while she was removed from it. She couldn't fall asleep immediately, but her brain felt slow and groggy. She wanted to make another plan to escape. She couldn't. She started drifting. Somewhat removed from her planning, thinking, doing brain, she allowed the one thought that she'd been keeping hidden in the bottommost drawer of her mind to creep out and claw its way to her consciousness – *I'm not going to survive this*.

*

All of her friends at school had been telling her that living with only one of your parents, either mom or dad, meant Divorce. Divorce seemed to be something with a capital, like a foreign country. She imagined them moving there, away from Mom and Nikki. Dad was already leaving her alone lots of the time, just like when they had been at home, but now it felt even lonelier because Mom wasn't there. Grandma and grandpa were there, but they just wanted her to stay quiet. They said too much noise bother them. Sarah, one of her friends, was sad that her parents had gotten Divorced, because her dad was so far away, but, she shrugged, he now sent all the best presents on her birthday and at Christmas, and next year he was going to take her skiing with him and his new girlfriend. Liza wondered what it would be like to be far away from Mom and Nikki and grandma and grandpa and their cat and her goldfish. She already felt far away. Dad had said they weren't far away. He said they were just living closer to the middle of London. Her grandparents' house was bigger than their house, but she felt like she couldn't settle. It was two weeks since she'd tried to call. She hadn't called again. Daddy

was mad about it and she didn't want him to send her back to Mom to be Divorced. All her warm jerseys were still at home with mom. The first winter chill moved through her thin cardigan. The next morning, she cried when she had to go to school. She was cold, but she didn't want to tell her grandparents. Her grandfather, scared that she was feeling ill, ordered her to stay home, grandmother dosed her with medicine and put her to bed.

She opened her eyes to the light of the bedside lamp, looking up at her ceiling and thinking of all her favourite things that were still at the other house, when she heard raised voices coming from the living room. She slipped out of the bed and crept to the living room door. She peered in. Her father stood with his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes fixed on her mom who was standing on the other side of the room. Liza wondered where Nikki was. She was probably with a babysitter.

"Get over yourself. I saw him a few times. Nothing happened." She paused. "Okay, then. You don't want to talk to me, fine."

Her mom started walking toward the front door, but stopped when her dad spoke again.

"What were you thinking, Mags? He's a criminal!"

"He was my friend! We fought together for freedom! You don't understand. Everyone was suffering. Everyone was saying how sad it was that people were dying, but nobody was doing anything about it. I spoke out! I stood and fought! I had to run away from the place that is in my blood. Don't you tell me that he's a criminal. I'm a criminal as well and you married me!"

"You lied to me!"

"No. No, you were just too happy to jump into bed with someone less prudish than all the girls your mother kept wanting to push onto you."

Her father blushed. His skin was so light, that any colour made him really look funny. Liza kept her eyes on her dad.

"You could have told me the truth before we had Elizabeth."

"What truth? That I was alone and without money? That I hated my job? That all I wanted was to go home? And there you were. Stable and normal. I didn't plan on Liza, but you were very quick to pull out that big diamond of your mother's the moment I told you I was pregnant."

"This is your fault."

She shook her head. “Nothing happened.” She sat down on one of the armchairs. “Alan called out of the blue. I didn’t know he was here. We just had a coffee and catch up.”

“How many times did you see him?”

“Really? You want an exact number? Okay, four.”

There was a pause, as though her dad was waiting for something more.

“I promise.” Her mom sat forward in her chair, her voice softening. “I only saw him four times.”

“Why is he coming to our house now?”

Her mom shrugged. “He’s lonely. He also doesn’t know a lot of people here.”

“What about the late night phone calls?”

“I told you, that’s not him. It must be someone who has some problem with you. One of your deals that went belly-up.”

“When did it start again with you and him?” There was pause. “You don’t want to tell me? I want DNA testing done.”

Her mother stood and turned away from her father. Her shoulders were very tight, and when she turned back her eyes were wide and her lips pressed tightly together.

“She’s yours. DNA testing will show that.”

Her father folded his arms across his chest. “If you’re lying to me, I’ll make sure that you never see Liza again.”

“Ha! That’s a laugh. She’ll live with me.”

“There’s no reason why she can’t stay with me.”

“Be realistic. You’re travelling all the time. Your parents are too old to care for her. And you’re not going to leave me. I have never been unfaithful.” She paused. “I can be a good wife to you.”

“Why should I trust you?”

She didn't answer for a while. "I hope you will decide to try. I'll see myself out." She walked toward the front door, but just as she reached it, she turned around. "Maybe we should start somewhere fresh when you come home. It might be good for us to get away."

"Where?"

"South Africa is changing. Maybe it's time we settled there for a bit."

"What about running into more of your old friends?"

Her mom smiled. "You'll just have to learn to trust me, I guess."

Liza heard the door close quietly behind her mother.

*

He followed the gravel road leading down to the valley floor. He had kept his window rolled down, his music drowning out the insect noises and birdcalls from outside. He stepped on the brakes and felt the car slide forward over the loose stones, coming to stop in the driveway, behind the van. He had waited for the roadblock officers to change their shift. Better not to take chances. He dialled a number. The phone rang once, twice, before he disconnected the call. This was the agreed signal. It was a little childish really, like kids and their secret passwords for their clubhouse. Still it kept the hired help happy.

The front door opened. He'd had booked this cottage for the job the moment he found out the girl was coming to Hermanus for the summer holidays. All they did was complain. No gratitude. No respect for the plan he'd put together. He sighed. Eyes on the prize, man.

"Hey." He put his arm on the window and leant out.

"What now?" Brent was annoyed.

"I scored some meds for the girl." He picked up the little black case and held it out.

Brent unzipped the case. It held five plastic items, shaped like really thick pens, and a little line of thin needles.

"The meds are in there." He pointed at the pen shaped objects. "Press it against her upper thigh and inject."

"You sure about this? Is this the right stuff?"

“Pretty sure. And I checked it out on the internet. It’s easy to inject. Anyway, we just need to keep her alive till tomorrow. You’ll have to be careful. There’s a roadblock at the valley entrance. The police know about the van. Make a plan to cover it or hide it. Right?”

“Yeah, right.” Brent turned away, eyes still on the black case.

“Brent.” He called. Brent turned back. “One more thing. I screwed up, man.” Lie number one. “They got footage of your Tazz. When I went to drop the package into the post-box, I didn’t see that the neighbours had a camera.” Lie number two.

“What? This is bull. Are the police looking for me?”

“No, they couldn’t see your number plate, only the car. But there are hundreds of those cars around. You just need to get to Cape Town.” He bent down and reached into the glove compartment. “I got something for you.” He pulled out the revolver. He’d bought it from a cop eager to make some quick cash. “Here.”

Brent took it without speaking.

“It’s loaded. Don’t use it unless necessary. Just if you need to get out of Hermanus in a hurry, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I just need to get to Cape Town.” Brent turned away and walked back towards the cottage.

“Remember to give the girl the meds.” He started the car and drove up the gravel road. He grinned.

*

Liza opened her eyes once more. She heard movement in the van.

The lock was unfastened, the top flew open.

Liza lifted her hands over her eyes to shield them from the sunlight. “Water.” She managed to stammer.

Instead, rough hands grabbed arms and pulled her upright. Liza’s head spun with the quick movement and she crumpled forward and vomited all over the floor of the van.

“Urgh!” Both men jumped out of the way, swearing.

Johnnie grabbed her and pulled her out of the van. Liza thought about calling for help as he dragged her back to the house. She knew she should scream, but her throat was too dry. It felt as they were moving very slowly. Her feet were barely touching the ground, the trees, house, and ground were all flowing into one large haze, and it wasn't the heat. Her eyes were having trouble focussing. She closed her eyes and allowed herself her feet to drag along. The ground changed and she opened her eyes. They were already inside the house. Now it had felt as if time had gone too quickly. She'd still been meaning to shout, to try to run. Johnnie dragged her through the house and into the little room at the back. She could hear Brent's footsteps following them. Johnnie deposited her back onto the mattress.

She was sitting and then the whole world turned horizontal. She was lying down, when had that happened? The mattress's ammoniac smell now lingered through the entire room. Her heart was still pounding against her chest, as though she'd been running, and she was tired, tired enough to close her eyes and sleep forever. She felt as though she was going to be sick again.

Johnnie stepped away, allowing Brent to kneel down next to her. Even through the haze, Liza saw that Brent had something in his hands. Something black. "He said just to stick it in her leg and press the button."

"You sure it's not supposed to be pills? My Mom takes the pills."

"Shut up and let me concentrate."

Liza heard the sound of a zip being opened. She could see that Brent was holding something. She suddenly recognised the shapes of the items Brent was pulling from the case. She moaned and tried to sit up.

"Water." She whispered again.

Brent looked up from the little black case. "Get some." He told Johnnie.

Liza kept her eyes open, trying to focus on the black case. A bottle of water was in front of her face. She took it, but struggled with the cap. When she opened it, a good deal of the contents spilled over the mattress.

"For fuck's sake." Brent swore. He grabbed her one arm, pulling her upright and balancing her body against the wall. In the process, more water slopped all over her shirt and shorts.

Liza didn't care. The cool water felt better than the dry sweat. She sipped. "I need to check that." She gave an uncoordinated nod, her neck feeling as though the muscles had left it, towards the black case. "Please, wrong dosage could kill me."

"How?"

"Too much will stop my heart. Please." She held out her hands, still holding the bottle.

Brent took the water and handed her the case.

Her fingers were dumb. They struggled to open the pen. She frowned at the tiny numbers on the top, trying to see the dosage inside. She turned the dial to set the dose.

"What number is this?" She held out the pen for inspection.

Brent leant forward. "Six."

She turned it down, hearing the insulin pen click twice. Four units. A minimum dose. That's how the doctors did it if a person came in with hyperglycaemia, high blood sugar. They would give small doses regularly until the sugar normalised. Her fingers couldn't grip the needles. Brent, annoyed by the delay, grabbed the pen and inserted one of the needles at the top. He handed the pen back. She pressed the plunger, once, twice, performing air shots to release any bubbles from the needle. "You need to untie my hands."

"No." Again, Brent took the pen from her. "Is this right?" He asked.

She nodded, a headache pounding with each movement.

He pushed her down. Liza fell heavily onto the mattress, her cheek resting on the spot where she'd messed the water. His one hand closed around her thigh, holding it still. The other hand placed the insulin pen on her skin and pressed it. He'd injected close to a muscle. The pain was momentary, a mosquito bite compared to the pain still throbbing in her hand, and the bruised and broken skin all over the rest of her body.

They left and locked the door behind them. Her eyes were closing, when she heard voices. The door was one of those cheap plywood ones and Liza could still hear them. She lifted her head slightly, to open her other ear as well, every muscle stilled as she listened.

"We have to hide the van." Brent's strong voice drifted through the barrier easily. "They know that they're looking for a courier service van, they know that we're somewhere here and they've put up roadblocks at each end of the valley."

“Shite.” Johnnie’s voice was softer, muted.

“Don’t worry. He’s a sharp one. He’s already got a plan to get us out.”

The voices were moving away from her until the words were indistinguishable. Liza closed her eyes. What possible plan would get them past the police roadblock? She had started dreaming and thinking together. She thought she had to get over an athletics meet hurdle, but her feet kept hooking and she fell on her face and she must be crying because her cheek was wet. Was she dreaming with her eyes open? She closed her eyes, wanting to fade away into the world between, but knowing that other monsters lurked there.

*

Her parents weren’t getting a Divorce. But her parents also didn’t talk about the three months they’d spent apart. Liza had been shared. Every weekend she could go to her mom, and during the week, she stayed with her dad. She asked why Nikki wasn’t allowed to go to Dad’s. Her dad said that Nikki was too small. Her mom said that Nikki didn’t want to go. Liza wondered why she wasn’t being given a choice. But if she got a choice, what would she say she wanted?

Finally, she and her dad went home. Winter had passed and they were deep into spring. Her mom kept saying it was a fresh start, just like all the flowers blooming and trees sprouting again. Liza didn’t believe them at first. She kept her pink flowered suitcase packed and hidden under her bed. She didn’t want to leave her warm jacket and favourite toys behind the next time they had to leave again.

The season changed. They all moved out of their house and somewhere far away. There all the other kids laughed at her accent. She tried to tell them that she was right and they were wrong. She stopped trying and started copying their words and phrases. She got used to the very warm days and summer Christmas and the other types of food and all the different languages.

She also got used to not talking about the past. Her parents didn’t want to and her sister couldn’t remember. Liza realised that she was the keeper of her family history. As she got older, she started obsessing about family trees and collecting old family photographs that she organised into collages and scrapbooks and secret diaries. She started writing fictionalized short stories. She remembered. Now, she was hoping that after so much practice in remembering, she’d be able to forget this. Depending on whether she was still alive, of course.

Chapter 12: Lethargy

The smell of petrol. He was craving a cigarette, but wouldn't be able to light one here. He held the plastic container steady, making sure that none of the petrol spilt out. He bent forward, checking into the container to see how full it was. Almost there. He looked up. He'd driven to the outskirts of Hermanus, to a petrol station he'd never used before. He insisted on filling the container himself, asking the attendant to check his tyres and clean the windscreen. He made sure that the attendant was still busy. Still occupied but almost done. The lights had already come on, and moths were crashing violently into the florescent bulbs above his head. He looked around him on the ground, expecting insect bodies. He was still busy with his search when his pocket vibrated.

He swore. He checked the container again. That was enough. He stopped the flow of petrol.

"Hey man. Bring the card machine, I'm done."

The attendant nodded.

He tightened the top of the container and put it in his boot. The vibrations in his pocket stopped. The attendant brought the portable machine. When he'd paid, he took out a R10 and handed it to the attendant.

"Thanks, man."

"Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas!"

"Sure, sure. Merry Christmas."

The attendant walked off. His phone started vibrating again. He quickly got into his car. He glanced at the sign next to the petrol pump: No Cell phones. He answered the call.

"Is she okay?"

"Yes."

"You're lying."

"What do you want me to say? That she enjoys pain. Yes, she's a right masochist, that little rich girl. Mind that she doesn't start buying leather and whips the moment she gets home."

“You little fuck. Don’t mess with me. Don’t insult her like that. This wasn’t part of the plan.”

“It is now. We have to make it look real.”

“Not this real.”

He grunted. “Don’t call me unless it’s important.”

He put down the phone and tossed it onto the passenger seat. He started the car and drove home, ignoring the ringing phone next to him.

*

The house grew quiet and dark. She couldn’t see any light shining beneath the door of her prison room. She dozed and woke. Her head wasn’t hurting as badly. The swelling of her eyeballs were also going down and, although she couldn’t see in the dark, it seemed like her vision was clearer. Her body, still sore and bruised on the exterior, was a little closer to normal internally. Morning must be close. She hoped it was. They had left the bottle of water there the previous evening. She drank all of it in small sips, but stayed thirsty. She was becoming dehydrated. Her throat felt like it was cracking, like those pictures of a dried waterhole during a drought. Her stomach was knotted. Her bladder was full, her kidneys and back were sore. The place where Brent had kicked her was bruised and every breath hurt. Every time she tried to turn to get more comfortable, she winced with the pain. She got hot and then cold. Her hand had also started to ache again, her finger and knuckle throbbing. The minutes became excruciating. She groaned and cried. The daylight spread like a haze or a mist through the room. Her eyes closed again.

She heard a door slam. Radio static and then the news jingle. She could hear the female newsreaders voice, but not the words. The jingle sounded again as the report ended. Two pairs of footsteps came towards her.

“They didn’t report the roadblocks.”

“But they’re still there. I’ll go on my own. We can’t risk taking her with us now.”

The door was unlocked.

“Morning girl. Argh. What’s that smell?” Brent stepped closer. “Shit, she’s peed over the fucking mattress again.”

Liza turned her face away from them. Blood was rushing to her cheeks, colouring them with shame.

“Get her up. Take her to the bathroom.”

“What are we going to do with that?” Johnnie indicated the stain on the mattress.

“Just leave it. We’ll pay a bit extra when we leave.” Brent put a hand on her head and turned her to face him. “Little Liza isn’t so pretty anymore. You keep on messing. One last phone call, right? And then you can go home.”

His voice was soft. She was sure he wasn’t telling the truth.

Johnnie cut the cable ties around her feet and hands.

“Come on, get up.” Brent grabbed her left arm and sat her up. Johnnie grabbed hold of her other arm. Together they pulled her upright. Her feet felt raw from the previous day. She couldn’t walk on her own. They had to half carry her to the bathroom.

They put her in the bathtub. Johnnie opened the tap, not putting the plug in, but just letting the water run. Brent shook his head and grumbled on his way from the room. Liza leant forward, her sore ribs smarting viciously, and took a drink. She felt the cool liquid brushing along the cracks, making her imagine the first rainfall after a drought. “Please,” her voice still sounded hoarse, she cleared her throat, “please, is there something I can change into? Anything?”

“No.”

The water was pooling in the tub, the tap open too wide allow it to drain away immediately. She sat and allowed the water to wash her pants, but it left her feeling uncomfortable with her underwear and denim shorts sticking tightly to her skin. When she tried to get up, her left hand hit the side of the bath and she cried out. She lowered herself again. Carefully she pulled off the bandage, unwinding the gauzy cloth slowly. Johnnie pulled in a breath through his teeth. The raw red stump frightened Liza. She turned the hand around. Scarlet tendrils were running down the side of her hand, the skin inflamed, the blood seeming to pulse with a life of its own within her flesh. The wound started to ooze.

“Shit.”

“I think it’s infected.” Liza turned to look at Johnnie.

His eyes stayed on her mutilated hand. He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You're leaving today." He nodded, more to himself than to her. "You'll be fine."

She looked back at the hand. "Can I have something to disinfect it with? Dettol, Germaline?" He shook his head. "Can I have some new bandages?"

Johnnie left to fetch some. Liza put her hand beneath the stream of brown water. Although the cold water helped to ease the pulsing of the blood, she had her doubts about how hygienic it was. Years of using super germ-killing soaps and hand wash and she was now rinsing an infected cut with brackish-brown water, probably polluted by animal faeces and rotting plants. The thought made her pull her hand away and close the tap with her right hand. Johnnie had left a towel next to the bath. She used the towel to soak up the excess water. The rough material rubbed against her skin and when she pulled it away, she saw that little bit of fluff was still sticking to the place where her finger had been. She hesitated, considering whether or not to remove the fluff, but couldn't force her right hand to move closer to the place where her pinkie had been.

"Here." Johnnie held out the bandages.

Liza took the bandage from him and put it down on the edge of the bath. She wrapped the bandage around her hand. Intellectually, she knew that she wasn't wrapping it tightly enough, but every time she pulled the bandage a little forcefully, the pain made her cringe and her muscles contract.

"Are you done yet?"

Liza nodded, her breath catching in her throat and her left hand pounding even worse than before.

Johnnie held out a hand. She ignored him. She put her right hand on the side of the tub and tried to push herself upright. Her feet slipped on the wet surface and her legs refused to lift her. Johnnie shoved his hand in front of her face. She took his hand. She whimpered as she tried to get her legs to support her. Johnnie put his other hand on her ribs, supporting her body. His hand slipped as she climbed over the side of the bath. Slipped or moved, reaching her breast and massaging. She pulled away and stumbled, catching hold of the sink before she fell. She looked up at Johnnie. He picked up the towel and threw it at her. She dried herself with one hand.

“Hey!” Brent called. “Hurry up!”

Johnnie shifted from one foot to the other, showing his impatience. He grabbed the towel out of her hand and threw it over the sink. He took hold of Liza’s arm and she staggered along beside him.

Johnnie paused at the doorway. “Which room, dude?”

“Here.” Brent answered.

Johnnie turned round, facing toward the front door and dragged Liza with him. They went into a room on the right. The door had always been closed or the light off, so she hadn’t seen it before. Johnnie pushed her inside and pointed to a double bed standing against the far wall. Liza sat down on the white duvet cover. The room was cluttered. There was a single bed base standing sideways against the one wall and three easy chairs, so close together that it would have been difficult to sit in any of them. Besides that, there were piles of clothes on each of them. She recognised the t-shirt Johnnie had worn the day before. Three bedside tables stood on one side of the bed, on the other side there was one. The table held empty beer bottles, chewing gum wrappers and a MP3-player. This was where Johnnie had obviously spent most of his time during the last couple of days. Between the mess, there was a magazine folded in half, the open page showing an immaculate home. Her parents’ home. Her mom’s article. So that was it. That was how they’d chosen her.

“Right, now, Liza,” Brent smiled, “this is the last phone call. Say hello, get moneybags daddy on the line and hand the phone to me.”

Liza nodded. “Wait!” She called as he started dialling the number. “I need more insulin.” She was feeling shaky. Her stomach was tight and empty, her throat already dry again. The insulin had helped the previous evening, but she could feel it had already worn off. Her eyes were struggling to focus on Brent in front of her.

“You’ll get it after we’re done here.”

“Please, I can’t...talk...” She was overdoing it but if she could get him to give her another shot, she might be able to make it.

He considered her for a moment and then put the cellphone down. “Go fetch the meds.” Johnnie exited and returned shortly, the black case clutched in his hand. Brent had watched her closely

the day before. He held the pen, but he was turning the dial down. Two turns. Only two units. That wasn't nearly sufficient.

"I need more than that."

"Oh, so you can talk?" Brent grinned at her.

Liza pressed her lips together.

Brent put a new needle in and gave her another savage jab into her thigh. He waited a minute before dialling the number.

"Hello? Liza baby?"

"Mom." The word was nearly a sob. She took a breath, catching the hand motion Brent was making – wrap it up, move it along. "Mom, is Dad there?"

"Oh, baby. Are you okay? Have they hurt you?"

"I'm okay, Mom, but I really need to talk to Dad."

"Dad isn't here. He went through to Cape Town to fetch the money. The Hermanus banks didn't have that much cash for him at short notice."

Liza looked up and Brent. He put a hand over the phone. "Your sister."

"Mom, is Nikki there? They want to speak to her."

There was a shuffling on the other side of the line.

"Liza?"

"Nikki. Hey wait!" She called as Brent pulled the phone out of her hand.

"Make some notes." He paused for a second, pulling a piece of paper closer with several bullet points running neatly down the side of the page. "Get two large blue beach bags from Mr. Price Home. Put all the money in them. If there are dye packets or any sort of tracing device in the bags, I will find it and Liza will lose more than her fingers. At exactly twelve noon, you will climb into your car. Keep your cell phone close. I will call you and tell you where to go. Wear summer clothes. If I see any police officers following, I will kill Liza. I have been watching you and I will be able to recognise the police officers."

"Wait, what if my father's not back by then?"

Brent paused for a beat. “Make sure he is. I’ll be in contact.”

Brent was about to end the call, when Nikki called out. “This is going to be an exchange right? You get the money and we get Liza?”

“Yes.” Brent locked his eyes on Liza’s. “When you have dropped the money, Liza will be dropped off at your car. Just wait by the car for her.”

On the other side of the line, Nikki was silent. There was someone whispering in the background. Then Nikki was back. “That is unacceptable. We want to see Liza before we hand over the cash. It needs to be a direct exchange.”

“We’ll provide proof of life. You drop the money and then we leave Liza at your car.”

Nikki swallowed. “Okay.”

“Have the money ready by noon.”

Brent got up and stretched. “Johnnie, put her back in the room. Make sure her hands are tied behind her back, you idiot.”

Liza closed her eyes as Johnnie pulled her to her feet. She tried dragging her feet, she tried pulling back towards the front door, she tried to plead with Johnnie. Within ten minutes, her feet and hands were tied and she was back on the awful mattress. The smell of her urine, sweat and vomit were soaked into it. The sound of birds and insects outside reached her even through the closed window. Will Brent really take her to the drop? If there really were roadblocks, then it would be dangerous for them. She hoped that her family didn’t believe his lies. Maybe they had some sort of plan. She closed her eyes and wished for some type of unconsciousness to ease the pain of the infection and the vision of a deeper darkness creeping closer.

Chapter 13: Drop

Nikki sat in her car. The windows were open to let some air in. Her phone was lying in her palm. She could see her parents watching her from the front steps. Her father had gotten home only half an hour before. He'd arrived in Detective Maritz's car. When she asked, he admitted selling the Mercedes for more cash. He'd sold his watch and pawned his mother's ruby ring that was supposed to go to Liza when she got married. He came home with shoulders slouched. As they packed the beach bags, he'd admitted that he was about five hundred thousand short. Still R2.5 million was a hell of a lot of money. He hoped that the kidnapper would return Liza before counting the cash. The police were very unhappy with the plan. They said that the only guaranteed way they would see Liza again was with a direct exchange. This way, there was no control. Nikki had stood at the edge of the argument, listening to her parents and Maritz yelling at each other. Maritz had tried to stay calm, but the pressure was wearing on him as well. Finally, her mother had said that they would follow the kidnapper's demands, regardless of the police advice. That had probably been too much for Maritz. He said that he would go to the roadblock and see what he could do. Warrant Officer September was to remain at the house. Nikki shook her head, clearing it. She activated the phone screen, waking it up, and checked the time. 11:59. She'd already been sitting in the car for the last five minutes. The two blue bags were on the floor of the passenger side. The bags were on a special at the store. September had managed to get two of the last ones. What would they have done if they'd been sold out? Nikki shook her head, trying to keep her thoughts focussed on the coming call. She wiped her hands on her shorts. Even with the windows open the car was baking.

The phone rang. It slipped in her sweaty hands as she tried to answer it. She fumbled and pressed the right button on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Drive to Grotto Beach. Don't let any police follow you, don't have them waiting there."

The line went dead.

She stuck her head out of the window. "He wants me to go to Grotto Beach."

"Be careful." Her father called.

“Remember what we talked about, Nikki,” September cautioned. “Follow the instructions. No heroics. Make sure that you get proof of life before handing over the money.”

She could almost see her mother’s fingers dig deeper into her own arms, the arms wrapped tightly around the chest, as if she hoped that the action would hold her together. No words for Nikki though.

Nikki opened the gate and pulled into the road. She drove fast, but obeyed the road rules, as September had instructed. No need to be pulled over and waste time with traffic police. She drove down towards the seaside parking area, but a security guard at the boom stopped her. She leant out of the window. “I really need to park down there.”

“Parking is full.”

“Where should I park then?”

He pointed back the way she had come. “Parking there.”

Nikki had to park two blocks away from the road leading down to the beach. Even some of the roads just above were colonised by cars of various makes and colours. She walked down with a bag hooked over each shoulder, using her elbows to press the bright blue canvas closer to her body. She hadn’t thought that money could be so heavy. She was wearing a black bikini top with a green spaghetti-strap t-shirt over it, black board-shorts and flip-flops. She’d tied her hair in a ponytail and wore dark glasses. The phone was in her hand as she waited for another call. She looked around, trying to spot someone who looked suspicious.

There were plenty of other people around. She was surrounded by families walking down to the beach with kids laughing excitedly, plastered with sunscreen and hats, making their parents promise to buy them ice creams. A group of teenage girls in skimpy bikini-tops and very short pants jogged past her, giggling. Other people were coming back up the road. Sunburned tourists. A family with three small children trudged past her, all of the kids sandy, two of them crying, the eldest one shouting at his parents. Nikki continued down the long curved road with its twin tracks of tarmac that led down to the full beach parking areas and the white beach sand beyond. She passed the braai-area and the caves the beach was named for. She passed the packed restaurant. To her right there was a little plaza of sorts. Nikki had to dodge the skateboarders. At the edge of the plaza, there were the outside showers. Her flip-flops slapped the water running down as boogie boarders washed off their boards and bodies. She walked past the lifeguard station, coming to a standstill on the beach, the sand spilling into her flip-

flops, sticking to her wet feet and burning her. The sand reflected the heat from the white-hot sun. The crush from the high-tide waves and delighted shouts from holidaymakers were carried on the wind. She turned around, the bags still clutched close. Their straps were digging into her skin. She shifted the weight.

“Hey, your phone’s ringing.”

Nikki looked down at the little girl next to her and then at her hand. Her phone was ringing.

“I’m at the beach.”

“Nikki?”

“Liza! I’m here. Tell them I’m here. Where are you?” Nikki turned on the spot, hoping to see her sister. She sounded so close. Nikki’s heart pounded, they were so close to the end of this ordeal. Where was Liza?

“Nikki.” Liza swallowed. “Don’t –”

The call ended. Nikki stared at the screen, willing the line to connect again. Her phone rang again.

“That was your proof of life.”

“I want to see her as well.”

“She’s already on the way to your car.”

Nikki breathed a sigh of relief.

“Just follow my directions and soon you’ll be together again. Go into the men’s bathrooms. Go into the last stall, it has an out of order sign on the door. Leave the bags on top of the toilet. Go back to your car and leave. When this call has ended, throw your cell phone in the nearest dustbin. Don’t go back to fetch it. I am watching you. If you make any other calls or signals to the police, I’ll know and you’ll never see Liza again. Do it now.” The call ended.

She looked around. He said that he was watching. She was breathing heavily. The public toilets were behind her, on one side of the plaza. She stepped back onto the paving. A bright green dustbin was to her left. She took a deep breath and dropped her phone in. She walked away from her phone, her lifeline. The bathrooms were behind and beneath concrete pillars and beams, that cast zebra coloured stripes along the pathway.

Nikki stopped in front of the men's toilets. She pushed open the door. The room was dark and cold with weak light coming in from small high windows. She looked at the wall next to the door, searching with her eyes and her fingers for the light switch. She looked up at the ceiling, realising that there wasn't a switch, because there weren't any electric lights. The chill made her sweat cool against her skin, making her shiver as she walked across the room. The last stall had the sign on the door. She unhooked the straps from her shoulders, struggling to arrange both the heavy bags on the top of the toilet so that they wouldn't slip off. She closed her eyes in a moment of silent wishing and praying, hoping that nobody else would take them. She pulled the door closed behind her and left the bathroom.

In front of the bathroom door, a teenager in board shorts was reading the closed sign. When she came out, he said accusingly: "Hey, you were in the wrong bathroom!"

"What's it to you, you little prick? It's closed anyway."

The boy took a step back, his eyes widening and lifting his hands against her anger. "I didn't mean –" He shrugged and walked away.

Nikki's eyes followed him. His mother should tell him to stop eating junk food. Another man walked past her. His beer belly wobbled above his red swimming shorts. Two boys, probably in primary school, ran past. Nikki swallowed. She closed her eyes and took a step away from the door. And another step. She wanted to go find her phone. She almost veered left, but another step took her right again, towards the tarred road. As soon as she was past the first parking area, she started jogging. She wanted to get to Liza. She couldn't wait to see her sister. The running motion knocked her sunglasses off; she didn't stop to pick them up. She could always get new ones. She ran faster. People moved out of her way, eyes watching her as she rushed past. She sped along the road. Her flip-flops slipped as she tried to take the turn too fast. She was off balance for a moment, but managed to catch herself on one of the cars parked close by. She yanked off her shoes. She jogged over the burning, jagged tar to her car. The red Renault stood out clearly between the other cars. She ran full speed and hit it, holding onto the bodywork as she looked through the windows. The car was still locked and there was nobody inside. She ran to the other side and looked whether there was anyone sitting on the pavement, maybe temporarily hidden from her sight. She ran around the car twice and checked underneath it. She unlocked it and scrambled in, checking everywhere. She opened the boot, empty as well. She was out of breath, sweating, cursing and crying. She called to a parking attendant and asked if he'd seen anyone waiting by her car. He shook his head. She ran up and down the side roads,

maybe there was a car similar to hers parked somewhere close. She came back to her car and checked all around and inside once again. She sat down and cried. Finally she got into the car, started the engine and pulled out of her parking space.

*

A man dressed as a lifeguard walked into the bathroom. He went into the last stall and picked up one of the bags. He nodded to someone smoking opposite the doorway. The smoker dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. He went into the stall, picked up the other bag. On his way out, he removed the closed sign and threw it to one side. His car was parked on the yellow line in front of the lifeguard station. He got in, turned the air-conditioner to full power, turned the radio to a different station, and calmly drove away. The entrance to the beach parking area was used as a one way during the summer holidays. He drove slowly, along the long winding tar road which led past all the dunes, some of the sand spilling onto the road. He took care not to hit any of the families walking along the side of the road. The road passed cars parked almost bumper to bumper. He was able to exit the beach area without incident along the one-way exit, turning left into a new road.

*

“Where is Liza?” Nikki jumped out of her car and almost into Detective Maritz.

“Watch out! Your car!”

She looked over her shoulder. “Fuck.” She’d forgotten to put the handbrake on, she’d been in such a rush to talk to the detective. The car was running down an incline, heading towards the garden wall. The door was still open. She dived across the seat and pulled the handbrake up. Then she reversed the car, parking it properly, before switching the engine off and sitting there. The detective came to her door.

“Is Liza here?”

“No.”

Nikki sagged forward in the seat, leaning over the steering wheel again. “He said he was dropping her off at my car. He lied. Oh no. Liza.”

“Where is she?” Nikki heard her mom’s shoes tapping down the steps. “What did you do?”

Margaret pulled the car door open wide, she jerked it so hard, that the door bounced slightly at its furthest point.

“Where is Liza?”

Nikki looked up through her mother’s shadow and into her eyes. Her mother’s lips were drawn tightly together.

“Mom.” It was pointless to explain. It wouldn’t help.

She looked past her mother. Her father stood just behind her, checking through her car’s back windows, as though hoping to see his other daughter there.

Detective Maritz cleared his throat. “Did he provide proof of life?”

“Yes.” Nikki sobbed. “She spoke to me on the phone before he gave me the drop instructions. I asked to see her, but he said she was already at my car.”

The Detective shook his head. “We warned you about this drop. We said it was a bad idea.”

“What is he going to do with her?”

No one answered Nikki. Her mother turned, holding her husband, both looking like they were supporting the other. Nikki gripped the steering wheel even tighter, wanting to turn the key in the ignition and drive away. How could she have let this happen? She must have done something wrong. She started crying. Was her mother right? Had she just killed her sister?

*

The man had changed his t-shirt, leaving the white lifeguard shirt buried underneath his car seat. Deep under it, so that no one would be able to see it from the outside. He had changed into a black shirt with a picture from a Metallica album, the album name in white letters against the black background: Master of Puppets. He was parked close to the mountain, having driven up a side road that ended next to a trail leading into the nature reserve. He put on a cap, sunglasses and running shoes, before grabbing a bag from the passenger seat and a plastic container from the boot. He walked a little way up the hiking trail and looked around, making sure that there was nobody about. He left the path, pushing aside plants and tripping over hidden roots and rocks. He was no nature lover. The plants were scratching his legs and making them itch. He was moving too quickly, crashing through the flora. He just wanted to finish this. All he had to do was stay in a straight line in the direction of the wind. If he stood up on his toes,

he could see the line of houses about fifteen metres to his right. He walked on for a while longer, annoyed by the relentless branches cutting him and the sweat forming along the rim of his cap. He stood on his toes. This was right. The perfect place. He bent down, pulling the bag off his back. Handfuls of dried grasses would serve well as kindling. He opened the container and poured a little of the liquid onto the little pile he'd put together. He packed nature's tools of destruction neatly together. He pulled a lighter out of his pocket, clicked it and watched the flame flicker to life within his hands. The lit twig he tossed landed on his little pile of dried grass and twigs. The flame was strong. It devoured the small offering of grass and twigs and kindling. It demanded more. The man stood up, watching the fire springing to life, and turned away from it. He jogged back to the main pathway and then slipped and slid along the loose stones toward his car. He didn't wait, but drove away. He drove a few kilometres on, parked his car and waded into the fynbos once more. Each fire he set, he made sure to check the wind and line it up with a thatched roof house or lapa. The wind was getting stronger, blowing down from the mountain and toward the sea. By the time he set the fourth fire, the sirens had started.

*

Nikki heard the sirens. They were coming from Voëlklip side, from the mountain. The curve of the mountain showed tendrils of smoke, dirty grey clouds, standing out clearly against the blue sky. She stood in the dining room, looking out through the immense glass window. Her father was in his study. He'd locked the door and refused to respond to any questions. Her mother was storming through the house. Every now and then, she stopped to yell at the police officers. Other times she came into the dining room and shouted at Nikki. Nikki heard footsteps behind her and braced herself. The shoes behind her squeaked on the marble floor. She turned slightly, just enough to see September standing there in Croc shoes, the rubber sticking to the cold tiles. September had said that she needed more comfortable shoes. It drove her mother crazy, those ugly shoes squeaking through the perfect house. Nikki turned back to the window.

"What's happening?"

"There's a fire. A big one."

"Where?"

"The mountain, and the wind is chasing it toward the houses."

"What mountain?" Nikki turned so quickly that she lost her balance and had to place a hand against the window to stay on her feet. "Close to the valley?"

“No. Worse. It’s over towards Voëlklip, far from the valley, really close to the houses.” September paused. “They might have to shut the roadblock down. It all depends on the fire.”

“What? Why? You said the fire was far from the valley?”

“Yes, but we need all our available officers on the opposite side of the town to do crowd control, block off roads and get the fire trucks through quickly enough.”

“That’s unacceptable. Call in reinforcements from somewhere else. You have to catch this guy before he takes Liza away.”

“It’s impossible.”

“Have you told my parents?”

“Your father threatened to sue the South African police force. Your mother threw a glass at me. Luckily, she missed or she would be off to the station now. There’s nothing we can do. We only have so many officers available. We have to put all those in Voëlklip’s safety first.”

“If you’d just done your job, then Liza would be here now. She told you where she was, why couldn’t you find her?”

“Why couldn’t you?”

Nikki blinked. Of course, September would have been informed about her search through the valley. She swallowed. “I’m just a girl. You have a whole army of trained people.”

September closed her eyes for a second. “Not everything revolves around your little family and your problems. We are doing the best we can to get your sister back safely. But crime doesn’t stop just because something happened to your sister.” The officer left the room.

Nikki almost expected her to come back again. When she didn’t, Nikki fetched her car keys, opened the front door and gate and sped away. The light was a mix of dirty grey-black smoke, blacking out the sun and bathing the whole of Hermanus in some apocalyptic red lighting. There was only one car left at the roadblock into the valley, and only two police officers. She drove into the valley without any opposition. She drove faster than she should have, wondering how she could have been so stupid. She must have missed something in the instructions. Maybe they thought she’d gone back for her phone. Maybe she put it in the wrong bathroom. Maybe he realised that her dad had put too little money in. Whatever happened, it still meant that Liza wasn’t coming home. She imagined Christmas, birthdays, weddings, celebrations, tragedies all

without Liza. She imagined her father never being able to look at her again and her mother accusing her whenever she was in earshot. She refused to accept this reality, this possible future. She drove onwards.

*

He dialled one of the numbers he'd memorized. One he hadn't called before. A female voice answered.

"Detective Maritz, please."

"He's out. Can I take a message?"

He was probably still at the West family house.

"No, I just have a tip. I saw a suspicious car at Mr West's house. It was a white Toyota Tazz with Mpumalanga number plates. I got part of the number, it was 183. It's been around the house a few times. And I think I just passed it as it turned out of the *Hemel en Aarde* Valley. It sped off towards Cape Town."

"Who did you say you were?"

"Just one of Mr West's neighbours."

"Can I get your name, sir? Then Detective Maritz can call you back a bit later."

"You know, I don't really want to get involved. Just tell him about the car. This is really important."

"Sir –"

But he'd put the phone down. He closed his eyes, the smell of smoke coming in through the windows and the sirens sounding very close. He lay down on the couch, feeling his shoulders relax for the first time in days. It had worked. The plan was working.

Chapter 14: Loose ends

Liza opened her eyes. She'd been thinking, thinking about death. Not specifically about her death, although she hoped that it would be quick, but rather thinking of the people who she wasn't going to see again. Nikki had been playing her music loudly in the house. Liza wasn't a big aKING fan, but the lyrics had stuck in her head.

The traumatic expectance of my mortality,

Though my existence doesn't mean that much to me,

All of my acquaintances will be missed,

But I think of all the ones I hold dear,

The ones I've been blessed with.

Mom. Dad. Nikki. Her grandma. Oh, this would kill them. Just a couple of weeks earlier she'd argued with her grandmother, telling her that the country was safer than people thought. Her friends. Kath, her best friend since high school. Oh no. Poor Kath, especially so soon after her mom had passed away. Juandr . She was still waiting for him to make the move, why hadn't she told him how she felt? What about her new job? What would her parents tell people?

A door slammed. A loud celebratory cry broke the silence.

"Yes!" Johnnie's voice was piercing. "Whoo-hoo!"

Their loud excited voices reached her clearly.

"Come on, man. Focus. We need to move."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Grab those bags. Let's divide it."

"Is this all of it? Freaking hell, that's a lot of cash."

"This is our share. Half yours, half mine."

Silence returned. She wanted to sit up, to get ready for whatever was coming next, but every movement made her feel lightheaded. The water she'd drunk that morning in the bathroom had

been so long ago. They had ignored her pleas for more water and some food. She was having trouble keeping her thoughts moving in a coherent line.

Finally the voices spoke again, but they'd calmed down and she had to strain her ears to hear anything. "...equal...load the cars...open the transport case in the van." The voices were closer now.

"Get moving. I'll bring the girl."

"Can't we just leave her behind?" Johnnie whined. "That was the original plan, right?"

"Don't be stupid." Liza heard the key turning in the lock. "Hi, sweetheart. The good news is that your mommy and daddy paid all their debts." Brent pulled her upright, making her head spin and the nausea rise again. He half-carried her to the open front door. Johnnie was busy throwing sports bags into the back of a white car. "Is it clear?" Johnnie moved over to the van, checking the road. He nodded. Brent dragged her over the pathway and onto the gravel, the stones slicing into her bruised feet. He pushed her into the van. "Get in there." The box was open.

Liza struggled to focus, her eyesight once again starting to get blurry. "No." Liza tensed her sore muscles, trying to dig in her feet.

Brent smiled. He lifted her, pushing her into the back of the van. He climbed in after her. She turned to face him. His one hand lifted, touching her hair, resting on her shoulder. She looked into his eyes. They seemed friendly, relaxed, then suddenly hard. She didn't have time to register the arm pulling back. The punch knocked her backwards. Without her arms to catch onto the netting or any of the shelves around her, she landed half on her back and half on her side. Her head hit the metal floor of the van and she groaned. She turned her face upwards, Brent was above her, pulling her up by her shirt, his fist raised. Another blow to her jaw made her eyes lose focus and her teeth rattle. Dimly, on the other side of a curtain of pain, as if she had become someone else, she felt her body being lifted and dropped heavily. The top slammed shut, the noise seeming to come from far away.

*

Her memory was fuzzy. Was it today or the next day? She groaned, softly, the sound of a puppy whimpering. She felt her concentration going up and down, a dream seesaw in a children's nightmare. Up and down. In and out. She was really moving up and down, the van

was rocking. She remembered the long gravel driveway leading up to the main road. That's why it felt as though she was being swayed, as if she was in a cradle rocking from side to side. She was drunk without the warm buzz that usually accompanied it. No, she was boiling, sweating. One moment the box was an oven, then a coffin left somewhere in an open field. News stories about babies left in cars, the backseat littered with teddies and empty juice cups now becoming a place of horror, their bodies unable to regulate and understand the increasing temperature, surfaced in her mind. She vaguely wondered how long it would take an adult to die. Would the heat get to her first, or the lack of oxygen? She wondered if it would be painless.

A sharp turn made her slide across the bottom of the box and bang her head against the wooden side. She moaned and tried to move her arms to shift into a more comfortable position, but before she could, another sharp turn made her slide to the other side of the box. The van was slowing, climbing. The engine whined and she could hear the gears change. She heard the tyres crunch over gravel, small rocks jumping up and hitting the bodywork, her head thudding with each painful knock.

The wheels stopped, the engine went silent. She imagined a desert, dying of thirst, being burned from above by the uncaring sun and from below by the super-heated sand. She felt herself drifting, a raft on the ocean, forgotten, lost, a wanderer through the desert, her bones hidden beneath the sands. She heard the noise of a wave crashing, but the only wetness she felt was the sweat running in little rivulets down the crevices of her body. The top of the box was lifted off. Her eyes adjusted to the sudden light, but she could barely make out the shapes above her. The naked light, even the dimmed light of evening, burned her eyes and she felt tears forming involuntarily at the corners of her eye.

She could hear moaning. It sounded as if an animal was dying. She felt sorry for it.

"Shite." The top of the box slammed shut again, but the swearing continued.

*

Brent had put the moneybag on the passenger seat next to him. He put his hand on the money, feeling the crisp notes beneath his fingertips. When dividing the cash, he'd made sure that Johnnie's share had been a little less than his, poor stupid bastard. He hadn't had time to count it out yet. He smiled and imagined all the money bills spread out on his four star city hotel room bed. Maybe he would roll in it a little, like in the cartoons of his childhood. He turned out of the valley and joined the highway. His muscles tensed and his hands gripped the

steering wheel. His eyes kept glancing around, checking out the other cars on the road. Johnnie would also take care of the girl. The money had stiffened his backbone. If they ever did this again, he would recommend they get someone else. Johnnie wouldn't do it again. Brent sighed and rolled his eyes. He'd told Johnnie that they were going to get rough. The kid had insisted that he could handle it. His phone rang. Ha, speak of the devil!

"Is it done?"

"Brent, man, she looks half-dead already. She's making this weird noise."

"So what's the problem? Cut her throat, knock her on the head and dump her."

"No, I can't do that. We should have taken her back."

Brent closed his eyes for a moment. "Calm down. You knew this was coming. Grow a pair and do it. Or do you want me to call someone else to come clean up your bloody mess? Then you'll have to pay back what you just earned. That's the deal, all the way or nothing. Think about it. Right? Do you want that?"

The voice was calmer, steadier on the other side of the phone line. "No, I don't. I'll do it, okay."

"Don't call me again."

"I won't."

Brent put the phone down and looked up. There was a roadblock and he was being waved down. He considered just driving past. Fuck. What else could go wrong? He put his foot on the brake and pulled in beneath the grove of bluegum trees. Through a fence, he could see an apple orchard, beautifully ripe apples swaying in the wind. He pulled the bag next to him closed and wound down his window.

The tall police officer had to almost bend double to put his head next to Brent's. "Afternoon, sir. Can I see your license?"

"Um, sure. Let me just get it out." He got his wallet out of the glove compartment. He touched the leather of the wallet and felt the icy steel of the gun, made colder by the air conditioning unit spewing cold air into the compartment. He closed his fingers around the leather and handed the card to the police officer.

His fingers tapped on the steering wheel and he could feel sweat forming on the back of his neck.

“Mr. Rogers. You were talking on your cell phone just now.”

Brent almost laughed in relief. “Um, yeah. Sorry about that. A call from my girlfriend,” he smiled and shrugged, “had to take it.”

The traffic officer walked the front of Brent’s car. Checking the number plate and the license disk.

Brent swallowed convulsively. Brent waited until he was sure the officer was looking away, before checking his bag. It was slightly open. He reached over, wanting to close it.

“What’s in the bag?” The officer was back at his window.

Brent smiled back. “Just a few odds and ends.”

“Step out of the car, sir.”

“What? Why?”

“Just a routine check.”

“Okay, okay. I just want something out of the glove compartment.” Brent leant over again. Allowing his hands to close around the metal. Before the officer even spotted the gun, Brent had turned around in one fluid movement and shot him. He turned the key in the ignition. The engine wouldn’t start. The car had an immobilizer that had to be disarmed first. He swore and looked out the window. Another officer was approaching, weapon at the ready, aimed at his head. Brent lifted his firearm again, but didn’t have time to press the trigger a second time.

*

The door opened again. Quiet, breathy swearing punctuated Johnnie’s ascent into the back of the van. The top of the box opened again. Johnnie’s hands gripped her shoulders, lifting her up.

She tried to get words out, any words. Her lips seemed sealed stuck; she thought that the sore on her lip must have broken open again, since she could taste a bit of blood on her tongue. Her throat seized up. Her tongue was too numb to form into the right shape for words and sounds. She tried to pick up her head, tried to lift the pressure from her throat and vocal cords. Her chin dropped forward, as if she was a puppet.

The grip on her shoulders seemed to tighten. He turned her around, so that her back was now to the van doors, and dragged her from under her arms. Liza’s sweat drenched legs and thighs

stuck to the metal of the van's floor, her skin was being peeled off, left there as a visible stain. Johnnie's weight shifted as he stepped down from the van, he was still dragging her. It felt as if her body was divided, sawed in half by some manically grinning magicians assistant, the one half in the open air, sunlight drifting across the skin, gravity being thwarted by the arms holding her up. Her bottom half was stuck to the floor of the van, heavy, painful. One quick pull detached her legs from the van and they fell to the dusty road. Liza gasped. Her bare heels dragged along the gravel, little stones flicked up and a small dust cloud rose and settled over her stiff feet. She was moving further and further away. Where were they going? Johnnie dropped her roughly. His left hand let go of her first, so again she landed on the infected hand. Her vision went dark. She curled up, pulling her legs to her chest, turning her eyes to the ground and let out a hoarse cry. The last daylight faded. No, it was an eclipse, a shape above her blocking out the sun. Her kidnapper knelt down. Through her half-closed eyes, she saw him raise his hand, holding something, holding something out to her? She opened her eyes a little further. The knife was pointed down. She could almost feel the edge getting ready to cut into her heart. Liza lifted her chin, closed her eyes and waited.

"Bitch! Just die!" Johnnie stood up, kicking at stones, dust gathering around his feet. He was pacing up and down in front of the van. He paused and looked at her, then kicked a stone towards her and looked away. His eyes were focussed on a point behind her. Liza blinked, a long, languid, closing and opening of her eyelids. She barely had time to register the man rushing towards her. The motion must have started while her eyes were still closed. She felt the hands grab her arm and shirt, she heard the fabric tear, as he half lifted her. Far away, car brakes squealed and gravel ground. Liza was in a rollercoaster and she was turning around the earth and the sky. Was she rising or falling? Her sense of reality gave way to childhood nightmares informed by nausea inducing carnival rides. The shirt tore further, only a second later her arm was released as well. She was falling. She could see the man looking into her eyes. There was movement behind him. She was moving away from him, going down. She hit the ground. She was rolling, rolling. Her hazy vision became a crazy blur of branches, leaves, stones, and kaleidoscopic pieces of passing sky. She couldn't close her eyes. What if this was the last thing she ever saw?

*

He stumbled back, only half-aware of the hands pulling him off balance. His feet slipped on the gravel. He took a few steps back to regain his balance and looked at the man in

front of him. The man was shouting. Johnnie couldn't make out the words. There was a rushing sound in his ears, almost like a stormy evening wind or crashing waves. The man in front of him had gone down on his knees and was shouting, but not at him this time. Johnnie felt as though the wind and the rain had moved down from his ears and was swamping his heart. Thoughts were blinking like neon lights in his head. Brent had said that no one should see him. This man had. He'd seen the whole thing. Shit. Even if he told the police that Brent had made him do it, he was the one who killed the girl. Brent had promised that it would be okay. No, not now. If he got far enough away, he could dump the van. Buy a new car with the money in his bag and disappear. The neon lights faded, leaving only one completed thought – get away.

His tyres skidded on the gravel. He turned his steering wheel too wildly and leapt across the road, only just managing to correct the alignment of the tyres before he crashed into the fynbos on the far side of the road. He put his foot down on the petrol, heard the revolutions rise, and remembered a little too late that he had to change gears. Johnnie was driving further up the mountain, heading towards the pass which would take him into Caledon. From there he would go wherever he wanted to. His hands were slick on the steering wheel. For a second he forgot that he hadn't used his knife, and when he looked down, he was almost shocked to see that his hands weren't covered in blood. The knife! Where was it? It had his fingerprints on. He'd seen enough police dramas on TV. If they found it, he was screwed. He looked on the passenger seat, on the floor, in the door. It was getting dark and he had to take one hand off the wheel to feel around the interior of the vehicle.

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck!" He swore.

He looked up, there was a turn, he was on it, he tried to turn away, to follow the road, but the wheels were skidding below him, just as though he was on gravel again. He moved his foot from the accelerator to the brake. The brake pads squealed. The sound of the brakes were echoed by his own screams as the van left the road and his eyes saw the sky stretching into eternity and the mountain stretching down into the abyss.

Chapter 15: Night in the Valley

Nikki drove slowly past the farms, turning into any gate that was still open, her eyes straining to see into the blackness, trying to make the potholes out before they got her and slow down before she hit the sharp turns. There were no streetlights out here and the late evening was falling into deeper darkness. The kidnappers might try to leave during the night. The police were distracted by the fire in town - that meant that she had to help. She had been driving around for hours without luck. The fuel indicator was moving closer to the empty sign and soon she'd have to head back to town to refuel. She was just pulling out of a long gravel drive, when flashing red and blue lights made her wait. A police car and an ambulance sped past, going faster than they should have been around the tight turns and up the steep inclines. She frowned, said a quick prayer to the deity her sister believed in and slammed her foot down on the accelerator. The bright lights allowed her to follow the procession at a slightly slower pace. The lights guided her, a lighthouse during a storm.

They were almost at the far end of the valley, when she saw the bright lights turning off the road. Nikki followed their lead. The small stretch of gravel, probably a last lookout point before heading into even narrower mountain corridors, was tightly packed with vehicles. There was the police car and ambulance. In the middle of the area, there was a large Toyota bakkie with its headlights on, looking as though it was ready for some sort of advertisement shoot - rugged and muddy, nose pointed towards the mountains. More cars and bakkies were parked along one side of the gravel patch; all their lights were on, pointing towards the edge of a cliff. The ambulance personnel had already jumped out and were running to the edge. Men with mountain rescue vests and ropes ran past her. Nikki pulled up alongside the police car, jumped out of her Renault and stuck her head through the window of the police car. "My sister! Is it my sister?"

The officer jerked back, his eyes wide. "What?"

"My sister. Liza West. She was kidnapped. Did you find her?"

The officer was very young. There was a sheen of sweat along his forehead and his police uniform looked almost a full size too big for him. He pushed his door open, moving her aside with the metal. "Miss, we're still assessing the situation. All we know now is that there is someone down the side of the mountain."

“Someone? Was it a man, woman? Someone about my age?” Nikki knew that she was talking too quickly. The words sounded jumbled, even to her own ears.

“Hang on, hang on. I’ll find out. Stay here.”

Nikki felt jittery and exhausted at the same time. She bounced up and down on the balls of her feet, trying to see beyond the lights and into the darkness.

The policeman came back, he waved her forward.

“I’ve talked to the witness. Was your sister alone?”

“No, no. She was kidnapped.”

The officer nodded. “Right. It is a girl. Early twenties. She with a man who tried to kill her by throwing her off the side of the cliff. He drove away in a panel van.”

Nikki lifted a shaking hand to her mouth. “Thrown off... Is she still alive?”

The officer grimaced. “They’ve just gotten to her now. The paramedics are working on her. She seems to be unconscious, but breathing.”

Nikki moved her hand from her mouth and reached out to him. “If it’s my sister, she’s diabetic. She hasn’t had any insulin in about four days. She might be in a diabetic coma.”

The officer looked jittery. He moved from foot to foot, his uneasiness showing. “Okay. Wait here.” The officer ran back in the direction he’d just come from.

Nikki looked around. There was no one else holding her back. She ran after him. He was crouched by the edge of the cliff. He called down her message. She knelt down beside him. There were a few men, flashlights illuminating the flora, moving on in a disco frenzy. They weren’t very far down. Only a few meters. The officer turned to look at her.

“You should wait by your car, miss.”

“If it’s my sister, I need to go down there.”

“Miss, we still need to verify who she is. She doesn’t have any identification or even a medical alert bracelet on.”

“Let me go. I can identify her. Please, if it is my sister, they need to give her the right medicine.”

The officer considered. "Right. Hang on." He turned away from her and called down again. "Pieter!"

"Ja?" The voice came from below.

"That girl's sister wants to come down to check if it's her sister."

"Nobody's coming down here. Keep her there. We can't go rescuing every idiot who feels like breaking their necks tonight."

"My sister is diabetic. She has to get insulin. Please let me come identify her." Nikki called down.

The voices below spoke together, making a decision. "I'll come get her."

Nikki saw a flashlight move quickly toward her. The man stopped just below the edge. "Listen," he shone the flashlight on her neck so as not to blind her, "she's in a pretty bad state. But if it is your sister and she's a diabetic, we need to know as soon as possible. That's why I'm taking you down. Right?" He waited for her to nod. "You're going to have to jump down, we'll help you, there are no steps here."

She stood up. The young officer held out his hand. "Here. I'll lower you."

Nikki's bare feet sought to find some sort of place to stand on her way over the edge. The officer above her was grunting, but he carefully lowered her. Another pair of hands closed around her midriff.

"Let go, Tswai." The voice came from behind her and suddenly the hands holding her arms released her. Gravity seemed to be pulling her backward, but then her feet touched the ground. The hands let her go. Even with her feet planted, she would have fallen backwards, down the mountain, if the officer hadn't caught hold of her arm.

"You're barefoot?" The police officer shone his torch down onto her feet. "We can't do anything about that now. Come on, carefully, hey?"

The officer picked his way through the fynbos, guiding her forward. Both of them slipped on loose stones. Her feet slid and bruised, but she carried on. They came to the little group clustered around the girl.

Nikki swallowed. The officer stepped aside to let her get closer. He shone his torch on the girl's face. There were so many bruises and cuts, that Nikki couldn't speak for a moment. She knelt down and touched the brown-blond hair, so short now, and nodded to the paramedics.

"It's Liza." She took a shaky breath. "It's my sister. She's diabetic."

The paramedics nodded. And continued to work. The flashlights showed the strands of blond hair. Her hair was oily and dirty. The red top was torn almost completely off, the black bra showing through the tears and the denim shorts were filthy. There was so much blood. Dried blood mostly, but it was everywhere. And dirt. The pale figure seemed to be buried underneath all the layers of dirt and blood.

One of the paramedics glanced up. "If you could stand back now, Miss." He put a thin blanket over her sister.

She turned to the police officer next to her. "I lost my phone." She thought of her choice of words. Lost, threw in a dustbin, what did it matter? "Could you let Detective Maritz and Warrant Officer September know that we've found Liza? They need to inform my parents."

"We have to get her to the hospital." The paramedic looked up from where he was busy inserting a needle connected to some sort of plastic bag filled with liquid. "They can meet us at the Hermanus Medi-Clinic."

The officer nodded and moved off a little to make the call.

"Is the neck brace secure? Her vital signs are stable. Let's get her onto the stretcher."

Two paramedics lifted Liza onto the stretcher in one practiced movement, and belted her in so that she wouldn't slip off and fall further down the mountain. Besides the neck brace, they'd put a splint on one of her arms. The one hand was heavily bandaged. They made their slow way up the mountain, feet slipping on loose stones, trying to make sure the stretcher didn't catch on the hardy fynbos plants. Hands reached down from the top of the cliff, lowering ropes and straps. The paramedics attached the stretcher to a makeshift hoist that had been erected at the top. The mountain rescue team was now in control and were giving instructions. They had set up the hoist while the paramedics were working on Liza. More hands reached down and very slowly lifted the stretcher. There was a moment or two when Nikki held her breath as the stretcher tilted and swung in the stiff breeze. When they'd finally lifted Liza to safety, more hands reached down to help pull them all up as well. Nikki climbed into the ambulance and

tossed her car keys to Pieter. Flashing red and blue lights bounced along the valley, as they sped back to Hermanus, a heart monitor competing with the whine of the sirens.

Chapter 16: Recovery

She opened her eyes and groaned. The room was dark, but a light shone brightly in the passageway, its rays purposefully seeking her eyes. She turned her head away, frowning, trying to move her tongue to generate saliva. She stopped moving. Someone had moved in between her and the passage lights.

“Sweetheart? Are you awake?”

She moved her head slightly. It hurt. Everything hurt.

“Hang on, I’ll call a nurse.”

“Water.” Her voice was hoarse and unused.

“Yes. Just hang on.” She heard the sound of water, moving and swirling into a glass. Her father sat down on the side of the bed. “I’m going to lift your head, okay?”

Liza gave a single nod. She felt a hand cradling the back of her head and a glass touched her lips. She drank slowly, but still choked and coughed. Her dad held her head and lay her back down.

“I’ll ask the nurse for some ice.” He got up.

“Dad. Am I okay?”

Her father paused on his way to the door. He turned around slowly. “How do you feel, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know. Everything is blurry.”

He sat down on the side of the bed again. “You’re going to be okay. You just have a bit of healing to do.” She kept her eyes on him. Since he had his back to the light, it was impossible to read his expression. He cleared his throat. “Maybe we should talk in the morning?”

“Please tell me now what’s wrong. Before I see myself.”

Her dad put his hand on her head, gently stroking her hair. “Okay. Tell me if you want me to stop.” He paused, as if hoping she would stop him before he could begin. “You’ve lost the

pinkie finger on your left hand.” Liza nodded. That one she already knew about. “The wound had gotten infected, so they had to operate and remove the last bit of the finger, the little that was still left, and some of the skin around the knuckle. But the doctors think that you’ll be able to get a prosthetic,” he added hurriedly. “The infection was bad. They have you on some very strong antibiotics.” He placed a hand on her forehead. “Your fever seems to have gone down a bit.”

“My head hurts.”

“Yes, you have a concussion and several bumps on your head. It’s probably going to be sore a while longer.” He cleared his throat. “Your collarbone is also broken. The doctors think that you grabbed hold of one of the plants, or maybe your arm was hooked, as you were falling; the bone broke as you rolled further down. You have a couple of cracked ribs. Those are the major ones. The doctors are all very positive. Your wounds are healing, the antibiotics are working and your sugar levels are stabilising. They say you’ll make a complete recovery.” He tried to sound cheerful, but Liza could hear the strain in his voice.

She tried to clear her throat. “Can I have some ice, please?”

Her father nodded and got up. “I’ll get it.”

Liza waited until she heard his footsteps echoing further and further away. She turned her face away from the doorway and the light. She didn’t think that she had enough fluid in her body for tears, but still they came. She dug her head into her pillow, feeling a crick in her neck that her father hadn’t mentioned, and hoped that the cloth would soak up all her memories.

*

Nikki stood at the door. Next to the door actually. Out of sight of the room. She leant against the cool wall and tilted her head back. She closed her eyes.

“Are you alright, honey?”

Nikki opened her eyes. A nurse stood there, holding a fresh jug of water and frowning.

“Oh, yes, just tired.”

The nurse smiled and went into the room. Nikki could hear her cheerful tones, small talk about the weather, summer holidays, an anecdote about how naughty her kids were during school holidays, Christmas shopping and monosyllabic responses by her mother. With a cheery “call

me if you need anything”, she exited again. Nikki wasn’t ready to go in yet. She rested her head against the wall and thought.

*

She was packing. The audition was in two days. She had arranged to stay with friends who had matriculated a year before and were now living in Sea Point. Her father had organised a hire car to be waiting for her at the airport. Her friends had already promised to take her out to all the best places to celebrate after a successful audition. The day after the audition she would have to fly back home. She was pleased that her dad was being so supportive. Even Liza had seemed a little happy for her. Mom had continued slamming doors and pressing her lips tightly together every time they mentioned Cape Town. But Nikki continued practising, she knew the pieces, she could feel the characters coming alive within her.

The door opened behind her.

“Please knock.” She spoke without turning around, her eyes on two glittery tops, trying to decide which would be best for a celebration outfit.

The door closed again. Nikki turned around, frowning.

“Mom. I thought you were still at work.”

“I thought we should talk before you leave.”

“Mom, I know what you’re going to say, but this is really what I want to do.” Nikki turned back to her suitcase and continued packing. “I’m better than you think. Our school’s drama department is amazing. Our play was awarded all sorts of prizes at all the competitions. I’ve been working hard.”

“Nikki, I just don’t want you to harbour false expectations.”

Nikki stopped and turned around. “What?”

“Dad and I probably won’t be able to support you if your acting,” her mother’s voice rose as she said the word, “doesn’t work out.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Fine then. As long as you remember that.” Her mother turned.

“Why are you so against drama? What’s wrong with studying something that I love?”

Her mother's hand had been reaching for the door handle. She stopped and faced Nikki again. "You need to look after yourself." She paused. "I'm afraid that you won't get work with a degree in drama. You should really consider doing something more practical, more market-related." She shook her head slightly. "In the end, you shouldn't expect too much from Dad. When it comes down to it, he'll choose Liza over you."

"For goodness' sake. Dad loves us both. Just because you always favoured –"

Her mom was shaking her head.

"You're a dreamer, I always knew that. You need to toughen up. Ken always coddled you too much. I sometimes wished you were more like your father."

Nikki heard the words and the tone, the flat tone they were spoken in, and her heart started pounding. She sat down on the edge of her bed. "Why did you never tell me?"

"I'm not telling you anything." Her mother's voice was sharp. "I'm just saying that you have to start making plans to stand on your own two feet."

"Do Dad and Liza know?"

Her mother walked to the door, opened it and stood in the doorway. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Yes." Nikki nodded sharply. "This is pretty damn important." Nikki felt the anger rising like a wave before it crashed, threatening to sweep her away.

"They don't, but I might tell him one day."

"Why? Why would you do that?"

Her mother looked out of the window, her eyes far from Nikki, her chin tilted up. "I too might want to leave sometime."

Her mother left.

Nikki didn't say goodbye to her mother. Her dad assumed that his wife and daughter had another fight and ignored the tension. He kissed her goodbye and wished her luck.

Anger and hate coloured her performances. She felt the raw power moving through her during the audition and the absolute exhaustion which followed it. Afterwards, she sat in one of the campus bathrooms and cried, wishing that she would never have to go home again.

*

Nikki took a deep breath, and pushed herself away from the wall. She peered around the side of the door. Liza was facing away, her eyes on the open window and the bright courtyard outside filled with birdsong. It had been hard to see her sister while she was unconscious. It was harder to see her awake. She felt an odd sense of superiority. Her parents had seen Liza at the hospital, once the clothes had been stripped and replaced with a generic hospital robe. They'd seen her after the blood and dirt and dried urine had been sponged off. She'd seen her sister when she'd been found. She'd seen the reality. She hadn't told her parents how bad Liza had looked. Nikki looked in. Her sister was sitting propped up against a leaning tower of fluffed pillows. Her hair was still dirty, oily, and all the hurts covered by bandages and plasters.

Her mother was arranging a massive bunch of flowers on the bedside table.

"Baby, do you want something to read? Some magazines?"

"No, my head still hurts."

"I can bring my iPad with music and movies?"

"Mom, I'm okay."

Nikki cleared her throat. "Hi."

Liza very slowly turned her head towards the door. She gave a small smile. Nikki almost flinched when she saw the broken lips, the bruises around the face, the heavily bandaged hand on the covers.

"We shouldn't crowd her, Nikki." Her mother said.

"Two's not a crowd."

"She still needs to rest."

"Mom, I want to talk to Nikki."

Her mother sighed dramatically. "Fine, I'll go grab a coffee. See you in ten minutes, baby." She leant forward and kissed her daughter on the forehead. She stopped next to Nikki before leaving the room. "Don't tire her out. You've already done enough damage."

The girls waited until their mother was out of the room.

“Come give me a hug.” Liza said.

Nikki blinked away her tears and sat next to her sister on the bed. She rested her cheek against her sister’s. She felt self-conscious about her hands, she was scared of resting them anywhere which could hurt her sister, but when she sat up again she noticed Liza flinch.

“Sorry, did I hurt you?”

“No, no. I’m okay.” She gave a small half-smile. “I’m getting better.”

Nikki smiled back. Tears came unexpectedly. “Sorry.” She turned away. “Sorry. I just keep thinking of what I could have done, and what’s happened, and I’m so sorry.”

“No, no. Nikki. It’s okay. You don’t have to apologise.”

Nikki took a deep breath. “How are you feeling?”

“Still a bit fuzzy and this headache just isn’t going away. Can I have some water?”

“Sure. By the way, I left Jaundré a message. He’d been trying to call you.”

“What? When?”

“Wow, um, about three days ago. The days kind of flowed into one. I thought it might be your boyfriend. Mom said you had one.”

“No, Juan’s just a friend. I was dating Jason, but we broke up a couple of months ago. He was a real jerk. Of course, Mom loved him, she was busy planning our wedding already. I didn’t tell her we broke up.”

“Oh, I didn’t even know you’d been seeing someone.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Liza smiled, even though it was clear the bruises and sores on her lips were hurting. “I’m just surprised to be here.” She took a sip of water. “So,” she handed back the glass, “who found me?”

Nikki swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“I remember calling you. After that, things became a bit,” she closed her eyes as though looking for a word, “disjointed.” She shook her head. “Just tell me.” A deep crease pulled her eyebrows closer together. “Did they get away?”

“No, no. Um, the one guy took you up to the top of the mountain. Do you remember that?”

Liza nodded. “Well, he took me somewhere. I was in the van, and then, I don’t know. We were somewhere.” Liza allowed her head to sink deeper into the pillows, turning her eyes away from her sister and looking up at the ceiling.

Nikki bit her lip. “We can chat later. Do you want to sleep a bit?”

“No.” Liza closed her eyes. When she opened them, she focused them on her sister. Nikki looked like she had lost weight. Her skin tone was almost grey, no make up to hide the pimples breaking out on her chin and nose and no eye-shadow to draw attention away from the dark circles below the eyes. Her hair was tied back, some strands escaping along the neck and resting on the shoulders, almost as though she’d been in too much of a hurry to gather all the individual parts together in order to form the whole. Liza gave a small smile. “I’m okay. This is helping.” She tried to reassure her younger sister.

“If you’re sure then. But stop me if it gets too much. So, he got you up there and parked. A farmer was just turning into his gate, when he saw this van parked just across the road. The police had gone to all of the farms and left messages about a delivery van being hidden in the valley, so this farmer remembered it and thought he should check it out. He was just in time to see this man throwing you down the side of the mountain. He talked to us yesterday. Poor guy got the fright of his life!” She smiled, and realised that a joke about how Liza got half her injuries was probably in bad taste. She pulled the smile into something resembling a grimace, felt that this expression was wrong as well and instead cleared her throat. “He started shouting, and ran to see if you were okay. He said it looked like some of the plants broke your fall, but by the time he got to the edge, you’d already started rolling down and he couldn’t get to you. While he was trying to help you, the kidnapper jumped in his car and sped away. The farmer called the police and rescue services.” Nikki swallowed. She reached forward to take Liza’s hand, but hesitated for a second as she checked herself before squeezing the uninjured hand. “They were able to get you out, and you came here.” She leant forward, brushing her sister’s hair aside with her fingers, feeling the knots still there, and sat up again. “And you’re safe now.”

“Did they catch him?”

“No. They found his body yesterday. He was driving too fast, missed one of the turns and went off the side of the mountain. He died.” Nikki shook her head. “This one policewoman was telling me that the valley is cursed. Carol said that as kids they were told that they shouldn’t be out on the valley roads after dark. The legend from the area is that there are ghosts there, pulling

cars or carts or whatever they used to drive off the road.” She reached out and took her sister’s hand. “The other guy got pulled off as he tried to get through to Cape Town. The police got a tip to look out for a Toyota Tazz. They pulled him off, he panicked or something, shot one of the policemen and then they shot him. He died, but the policeman is in Hospital in Somerset West. They say he’ll survive.” Liza didn’t need to know the policeman would probably be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Liza closed her eyes, as though she was relaxing into sleep with the expectation of pleasant dreams, then her eyes shot open again. “What about the third man?”

Nikki frowned. “What third man?”

“There was a third guy. I heard his voice in the house. He was the one giving all the instructions, I think.”

Nikki shook her head. “We thought there were just two. We’ll have to tell the police.”

Liza shook her head and swallowed, holding out her hand for the glass of water. “Thank you.” Liza drank small sips, only lifting her head a little from the pillow. “Nikki, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Do what?”

“Survive all this. Dad said the police want to question me this afternoon. What if they catch this third guy and I have to speak in court? I just feel like this is never going to end.”

“But you survived already. It’s already finished. You’re a fighter! All of this –” Nikki waved her hand in a graceful arch across the room, “is just finishing it off.”

Liza shook her head. “I knew I was going to die. I was certain. It was terrifying, but towards the end, it was a relief to know that everything would be over.”

“You’re overthinking this. It’s going to be okay.”

“I’m tired. Do you mind if I got some sleep?”

Nikki swallowed. “Sure.” She bit the inside of her cheek. She bent down and put her arms around her sister. “Don’t give up. I can’t lose you again.” Liza lay passive, not returning the hug, but just before Nikki let go, Liza raised her arm and pulled Nikki closer to her. Nikki almost sobbed. “I love you.” She sat up. “You’ll be fine. Just stay strong, okay?”

Liza waited until Nikki had left the room. She turned on her side, facing the window, remembering that box, grateful for a view of the light blue sky, and closed her eyes.

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She dialled a number on her phone. A number she knew by heart. She stood outside, next to the hospital boundary fence, the smoke from her cigarette whipped away by the wind. Her hand was shaking as she pressed the phone to her ear.

“Bastard. First, you take the wrong girl, then you nearly get her killed. You promised me that they would leave her in the cottage. They tried to kill her!”

“Things got a little out of hand.”

“A little? She was half-dead when they found her! And you told me she was okay. She’s covered in bruises and cuts and broken bones.”

“You knew that it might get rough. Anyway, your husband short-changed us.”

“You little fuck. If you ever come near my family again, I will call the police so quickly –”

“And what? Hand me in? I have records of all our conversations. If you try to do anything to me, you’re going down as well, and you have more to lose than I do. Well-known, respected member of the society pages, like you? Imagine what this could do to your reputation. All I need to do is call in a tip to the crime-stop hotline.”

With a shaking hand, Margaret West pushed her windblown hair from her eyes. “Just stay away from us.”

“Are you still going to leave him?” The voice on the other side of the line was curious.

She didn’t answer. She pressed the end call button and turned the phone off. She wouldn’t be using that phone again. After all, Liza was safe and sound. She’d see how she felt a few weeks down the line.

She took another long drag on the cigarette. She remembered the first time he’d called her. She hadn’t recognised the phone number. Usually she wouldn’t have answered. For some reason she answered the call that day.

“Hello, I’m looking for Margaret Hulme?”

Her maiden surname. “Yes. Who’s speaking?”

“My name is Dom, Dominic Manco. I think you knew my father.”

Manco. Karl Manco. Dark hair, smouldering dark eyes. Small stature, but women had liked him. “Your father is Karl Manco? How is he?”

“Dead. Lung cancer two weeks ago.”

“I’m sorry. He was a -” she bit the side of her cheek, trying to find the right word, a word which would encapsulate their history, his actions and her memory of him, “a good man.”

“Not really. He left a bit of a mess. He just left a few numbers of people he wanted me to call after his death. The funeral was last week.”

Margaret West thought about it. She believed in destiny. She wondered if he looked like his dad. “Listen, I might not be able to help, but, can we meet?”

He felt a little like the son she’d never had. He had his father’s features, but with a better body. He was smarter than his dad though, she realised that after the first few sentences. He had been suspicious, but the fears about the unpaid debts were too close to the surface to stay submerged for long.

Who had come up with the plan? She wasn’t sure now. She thought it was his. She wanted it to be. This wasn’t her fault.

Chapter 17: Winter

Nikki watched the travellers troop out of the domestic arrivals gate. She saw women with high heels and business length black skirts clicking away across the tiled floor. She saw a wife running up to her husband and holding him, before they walked off, hands clasped tightly. Somehow you could see they were married. A mother with a very young baby was covering her child's head against the weather they would meet outside. Her eyes were still following the mother and child, when a voice made her turn.

"Liza!" They wrapped their arms around each other. "How are you? How was your flight?"

"Bit bumpy. I hear you've had some bad storms?"

"Hmpf. It's been raining non-stop for the last two days. Terrible weather to come to Cape Town in. On the other hand, lovely weather to be snuggled up in a cosy little theatre watching a student play." Nikki laughed, Liza smiled. "Come on, let's get going."

They drove together in silence for most of the way to Nikki's Rondebosch flat and ran through the rain to get inside. It was decorated with shades of burnt orange and red. The carpet was a deep royal blue. It looked like some sort of crazy coffee shop. Liza felt a little overwhelmed by all the colours. Nikki had posters of theatre productions at the Baxter and the Artscape on all the walls. The wall above her desk had photographs of friends in various group poses and one or two of their family. Liza lingered in front of the display. Her fingers pulled straight the picture of the sisters taken just after Nikki finished high school. Nikki had donned her old school jacket. She'd stuck badges all over the blue fabric and exchanged the dull metal buttons for oversized red ones. Liza was holding the jacket lapels and pulling a face. She couldn't remember why.

"Seriously, it means so much to me that you came." Nikki came out of the kitchen with coffee for both of them. "So tell me, what's new?"

Liza shrugged and sipped her drink. Nikki noticed that she was keeping her left glove on. The hand lay neatly placed on her thigh, seemingly passive, but not looking completely comfortable. Liza had phoned a few months earlier to say that a doctor had fitted the hand with a prosthetic pinkie. Her father had called to say that it looked fine and not to make an issue

about it. Nikki remembered that Liza had always held her coffee cups with both hands. Liza wore a thick thermal jacket and a pink scarf. She'd picked up weight and the jacket bulged in places where it had previously fitted. She wore boots over her dark blue jeans. Her hair was short, beautifully cut and dyed black.

"The haircut looks good." Nikki smiled, hoping to get a conversation started.

Liza touched the hair a little self-consciously. "Mom organised it. I just wanted to leave it."

Nikki touched her own fair hair. She'd let it grow out for the play, but she wondered how it would look a little shorter. She still felt the dampness from the Cape of Storms clinging to it. Maybe she should dye it as well. She quickly looked away from Liza, hoping that her expression hadn't changed. Copying Liza had been a habit, one that she was still having trouble kicking.

She cleared her throat, trying to find a safe topic of conversation. "Are you writing? I mean, what are you doing every day?"

"I'm catching up on all the movies I've missed the last few years." She smiled, but tightened her facial muscles again. "I'm sorry. I feel so bad. I don't have anything to talk about, because I haven't been doing much. I was supposed to start a job in Pretoria, but I just couldn't. I cook for Mom and Dad." She shrugged. "I watch all these shows about cooking and health stuff and I try out the recipes. It's all very safe and boring." She finished her coffee. "I am actually writing. Don't tell Dad and Mom," she cautioned. "I'm writing a sort of biography. About what happened. My psychiatrist recommended that I try that. I didn't think that I'd be able to, I mean, that I'd want to." She smiled again. "It's hard, but it's helping."

"Intense. Are you okay?"

"I'm getting there. I want to start working next year. I can't keep hiding in my parents' house for the rest of my life. I talked to Granny. I'm hoping to go stay with her in London for a while."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Leaving early December."

Nikki smiled, trying to keep her expression positive. "That's exciting. Granny will be happy to have you there."

Liza nodded. "Yeah. I'm looking forward to be away for a bit. Oh, by the way, did Mom tell you they're selling the house in Hermanus?"

"Really? I didn't think Mom would ever sell it."

"They need to. Dad's had to give up the legal action he was taking, he doesn't have enough money to keep up with the legal fees. They're looking at an out of court settlement, but that probably won't even be a fraction of what he's owed. They're also not going away at the end of the year."

"I didn't know it was so bad."

"I feel a bit guilty about it all. I mean, they're in trouble because of me."

"Ag, no. That's ridiculous. This wasn't your fault." Nikki scooted forward on her seat and put out her hand. Liza took it. "We just wanted you back again. We wanted you to be safe." Nikki stood up. "I'm just glad you're here. And, since you're now a gourmet cook, how about making some lunch for us?"

They both laughed. In the kitchen, Liza changed the topic.

"So what's been happening with you? How are your studies going?"

"Everything's going well. I'm working hard." Nikki caught the practised blank look on Liza's face. "I'm serious. I'm done fooling around. I'm a good student now." Nikki grinned.

"Am I going to meet your boyfriend?"

"What boyfriend?"

"You always have a boyfriend."

"Nope. Not at the moment."

Liza put a hand over her heart. "Can it be? What have you done with my sister?"

Nikki giggled. "I told you I'm serious now." She paused, walking over to the pot and smelling. "Oooh, that smells good." Liza had grilled chicken breasts in olive oil, seasoned with Cajun spices and garlic. Now she was making a pot of mixed vegetables to go with it. The rich scent of fried onions, tomato, aubergine and mushrooms filled the flat. Nikki took a step back and leant against some of the cupboards. "There is someone. I mean, I like him and I think he likes me, but he hasn't made any moves yet. He's sweet and smart and funny. I don't know how to

describe him, he keeps me guessing. The best way I can explain it is that he's a man. Not just a guy."

"Ah, I see."

"I really like him, but I don't want to be nagging or needy. He's working and always super busy, so I don't want to pressure him."

"This sounds serious."

"Not really, I hardly ever see him, but it feels like it could be, you know. I'm hoping he makes it to the play tonight, then I can introduce you."

"That would be great! Wow, Nikki. I can't believe that this is you."

Nikki swallowed. She was pleased by Liza's tone of voice. It sounded like praise. She cleared her throat. "What about you? Are you dating anyone?"

"No. Single as they come."

"What about that other guy? John? Jean?"

"Juandré." Liza shook her head. "We're just friends. He wants something more, but I'm just not ready. I had been waiting so long for him to make the move, but after all the things that have happened." She shrugged. "He's been really good about it."

Nikki felt an awkwardness in the room. She was sorry she'd asked the question. She quickly offered Liza more coffee or juice and poured fruit punch into two glasses. Nikki watched her sister adding pepper and herbs to the pot.

She wondered if Liza would be flattered if she knew that she'd inspired this change from party girl to good student. Not in the way that their mother had tried to initiate it, through manipulation and guilt. That night in the valley, while waiting for them to bring Liza up, not knowing if she was going to make it, Nikki had had an epiphany. It could've been her lying there between the fynbos. If it had been her, would anyone have missed her when she was gone? No, it was time to make some changes.

Nikki cleared her throat. "I also got an internship."

"What? Where?"

“It’s a PR and marketing company that specialises in the creative industry. They work with musicians, actors, writers, artists. They do a lot of advertisements, bookings and promotional work. The money can basically cover my petrol down to the centre of Cape Town and my daily lunch, not much else. I’ll work for them during the holidays. I really hope that the position might become permanent at the end of next year, when I finish my degree.”

“Have you told Mom about this?”

“No.” Nikki rolled her eyes. “Honestly, if I’ve spoken three times to Mom this year, that will be a lot.”

“Oh please let me know when you’re about to. I’ll video the occasion for you. Mom’s going to be livid. She was pushing you into marketing, you refuse and you end up doing it anyway. Can you believe it?”

Nikki smiled. She liked having her sister back. “Hey, maybe I can be your agent when you’re a rich and famous author.” Nikki paused. “If I do eventually get the job, I need to find somewhere smaller to stay, closer to work. That’s fortunately still a while away, so far I’m just thinking about it.”

“You sure you want to do that? This is a great flat.”

“Yes. I’m sure. You were right last year, I need to start making some tough decisions and stand up on my own. Mom and Dad can’t keep on giving me stuff.”

Liza nodded and dished up the meat and vegetables. They sat down on the couch.

“Tell me about your play?”

“It’s a student production, and my part is really small, so don’t expect anything grand. I need to be there by 2:30,” she checked her watch, “damn. You can either drop me off and come back here, or –”

“Can I come with you? Sorry, I just don’t want to be alone at the moment.”

“Sure, no worries. I’ve already cleared it with the lecturer, he said that you could chill backstage until people started coming in, then you’ll have to take your seat.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Um, I’ve got a few friends coming to the play as well. And hopefully that guy I told you about. Would it be okay if we met up with them for a coffee afterwards?”

“Yeah, it would be nice to meet your friends. Um, just,” she hesitated, “do they know anything about me?”

“One or two of my close friends, but I asked that they didn’t spread it around.”

Liza nodded, biting her lip and clenching and unclenching her left hand.

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He stood on the upper level, looking down on the students congregating around the tables and standing in twisting queues for the coffee stand. There was laughter and dramatic hugs – arms spread wide and delighted cries. The students who had been in the play still wore their stage make-up, they were the ones with the biggest grins, and the most elaborate hugging techniques. He leant his weight against the wood and glass railings, enjoying the way the ceiling lights illuminated the whole of the foyer, but still kept enough shadows to make those below seem multi-dimensional, interesting. He swept his eyes across the posters high on the walls, the has-beens and the up and comings. The thought flitted through his mind. He smiled as he looked down at a small group raising glasses and laughing.

One of the girls, her blonde hair still set into large curls, draped an arm around the dark haired girl next to her. The other girl swayed slightly under the added weight, but smiled. He nodded to himself and walked slowly down the stairs.

“Hey!”

“Dom! You made it!” Nikki jumped up on the other side of the table. She ran around and pulled him closer to the table. “What did you think?”

“It was great. Yeah, congrats!”

“Aww, thanks. So, hey, these are my friends. Guys, this is Dom, we met last year. Dom, this is Angie,” she indicated a red haired girl, with a milky white skin and dark make-up around her green eyes, “Camilla,” a girl who was wearing very dark red lipstick and stage make-up, “Tarquin,” a tall blonde boy with dimples, “and my big sister, Liza.” Liza barely nodded, staying as she was with her head dropped and her shoulders hunched forward. She was still wearing her pink scarf, a bulky black jacket, jeans and black gloves with the top of her fingers peeping out. Her right hand was holding the wine glass, the left’s outline visible in her jacket pocket.

“I’ve missed you. How was the business trip? Where did you go again? Malawi?”

“No, it was Mozambique.” Dom smiled, leaning forward, looking into her eyes. “Well, the good news is that I’ve started my own company. My business partners in Mozambique loved the pitch and now I can get moving.”

“Really? What are you going to be doing?”

“Import business. I’ve already got customers lined up.”

“What are you importing?”

“Mostly seafood from Mozambique at the moment, but I’m hoping to expand soon. My dad had some connections there. My uncle helped me get in touch with some of them. Restaurants in Cape Town are desperate for fresh prawns and crabs. We pay in advance, get great deals, and charge the restaurants a premium.”

“Wow, that sounds complicated. Don’t you need cold storage trucks and all that type of stuff? Did you need to get a loan from the bank? I heard that interest rates are crazy.”

“I got an investor in.”

“I hope you got a good contract. You don’t want someone from the outside pushing you around.”

“Come on. Are you worried about me?” Dom teased.

Nikki looked into the dark eyes and wondered where this was going. Did he want her to make the first move? What would he say if she just leant over and kissed him? She pulled back, standing up straight. “We need to celebrate! Do you want to get something to drink?”

“No, I can’t stay long, sorry. I’ve got an early meeting tomorrow. But I’m dying for a smoke.” He pulled out the packet from his pocket. “Do you mind?”

“Um, no. We can go to the smoking area, right guys?”

Angie smiled. “Sure, I want a smoke as well.”

Dom and Angie led the way to the enclosed area, the canvas covers flapping in the wind. Nikki leant across the table to grab her wine glass. She turned her face towards the two walking ahead. Angie’s head only reached Dom’s shoulder, but she’d put her hand on his arm. He opened the door for her and smiled as she went through. Nikki bit the inside of her lip, trying to figure out how she felt about Angie tossing her hair and giggling so that her pitchy voice echoed through the throng. Tarquin walked through the door and his broad back blocked Nikki’s view of the

flirtation. She took a sip and hooked her arm into Liza's. She frowned. Liza seemed reluctant to move.

"Everything okay?"

"Hmm, um. I think I'll just stay here."

Nikki frowned. Liza seemed a bit paler, maybe it was just the muted lighting. Her hands were shaking and her jaw was clenched.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to go home." Liza dropped her eyes to the table.

"Hey, it's okay." She put an arm around her sister and squeezed. "Can I just go say goodbye?"

Liza nodded. Nikki sighed as she walked away from the table. Liza had said that she'd developed fears of crowds and noises, and even if she was in open spaces all she seemed to think about was that box. The claustrophobia hadn't disappeared.

The psychiatrist had told Liza she would probably struggle to make new friends and trust people for a long time, but they would work at it together. Liza had shared all this during long phone conversations, but Nikki had to breathe deeply as she walked through the door to the smoking area. It was frustrating to be out with her friends and Dom, and to have to leave so early. Dom blew out a long exhalation of cigarette smoke. It twisted above his head, dissipating in the slight breeze moving through the gaps between the plastic curtains and chilling the whole area. Camilla and Tarquin were toasting each other, both more self-congratulatory than actually interested in the other's accomplishment. Angie was still giggling and was standing very close to Dom. Nikki knew Angie's standard flirtation excuse was that she was cold, she was just sharing a little body heat. Nikki had to swallow. This was just such bad luck: Dom was finally here and now she had to leave because of Liza. A few years earlier, Nikki would have called Liza a spoilsport, but now she had to be sensitive.

Nikki cleared her throat. "Hey, sorry, Liza's not feeling well. I think we'll go home."

"Really?" Dom had been about to inhale, but moved the cigarette away from his mouth and frowned.

"Yeah." She felt a tingling along her skin, knowing that Dom wanted her to stay, even with Angie cuddling up beside him. She hugged Camilla and Tarquin, exchanging quick farewells.

Angie gave her a one-armed squeeze and a smiling goodbye. Dom put his cigarette down. He held out his arms and pulled her close to his chest. She could smell his deodorant and stale cigarette smoke on his shirt. "Thanks for coming, Dom. Sorry that I'm running off so early."

"Don't worry. I'll call you. Tomorrow?"

Nikki felt her smile widen and her cheeks colour. "I'd like that."

*

His eyes rested on the departing girl, before flickering away from her, finding the other girl. Liza's hair was still short, but now salon shaped. She'd gained weight since he'd last seen her. He itched to walk over to her and ask to see her left hand, to peel the glove off, to touch the raw, puckered skin where the smallest of her fingers had been. For a moment, he wondered if he would kiss it. Maybe. More probably, he would press his own fingers into the scars and see if it hurt.

Angie was asking him something. He took a long drag on his cigarette and thought about just leaving her there. Unanswered. No, no, no. He smiled and asked her to repeat. He allowed his eyes to soften as he looked at her, and shifted his weight so that he was leaning towards her, not away, as he had been. It was always good to have further options.

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Liza rested her head against the cold window, her sideways vision showing her the raindrops illuminated by the streetlights jogging across the glass. Running away from her. She felt guilty about forcing Nikki to leave and panicked at the thought of staying longer. She felt ashamed and relieved to be away from the crowds and the smells of alcohol and cigarette smoke and the echoing laughter. With shaky fingers, she loosened the scarf and tossed it onto the back seat of the car. She wondered how long it would take before she stopped hearing the third man's voice in the mouth of every man she met.

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